

TORCHY
AND VEE

SEWELL FORD





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BY
SEWELL FORD

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TORCHY, THE HOUSE OF TORCHY,
SHORTY McCABE, Etc.



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FOREWORD

In the Nature of an Alibi

SOME of these stories were written while the Great War was still on. So the setting and local coloring and atmosphere and all that sort of thing, such as it is, came from those strenuous days when we heroic civilians read the war extras with stern, unflinching eye, bought as many Liberty bonds as we were told we should, and subscribed to various drives as cheerfully as we might. Have you forgotten your reactions of a few short months ago? Perhaps then, these may revive your memory of some of them.

You may note with disappointment that Torchy got no nearer to the front-line trenches than Bridgeport, Conn. That is a sentiment the writer shares with you. But the blame lies with an overcautious government which hesitated, perhaps from super-humane reasons, from turning loose on a tottering empire a middle-aged semi-literary person who was known to handle a typewriter with such reckless abandon. And where he could not go himself he refused to send another. So Torchy remained on this side, and whether or not his stay was a total loss is for you to decide.

S. F.

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TORCHY AND VEE

CHAPTER I

THE QUICK SHUNT FOR PUFFY

I MUST say I didn't get much excited at first over this Marion Gray tragedy. You see, I'd just blown in from Cleveland, where I'd been shunted by the Ordnance Department to report on a new motor kitchen. And after spendin' ten days soppin' up information about a machine that was a cross between a road roller and an owl lunch wagon, and fillin' my system with army stews cooked on the fly, I'm suddenly called off. Someone at Washington had discovered that this flying cook-stove thing was a problem for the Quartermaster's Department, and wires me to drop it.

So I was all for enjoyin' a little fam'ly reunion, havin' Vee tell me how she's been gettin' along, and what cute little tricks young Master Richard had developed while I'm gone. But right in the midst of our intimate little domestic sketch Vee has to break loose with this outside sigh stuff.

"I can't help thinking about poor Marion," says she.

"Eh?" says I, lookin' up from the crib where young Snookums has just settled himself com-

fortable and decided to tear off a few more hours of slumber. "Which Marion?"

"Why, Marion Gray," says she.

"Oh!" says I. "The old maid with the patient eyes and the sad smile?"

"She is barely thirty," says Vee.

"Maybe," says I; "but she's takin' it hard."

"Who wouldn't?" says Vee.

And havin' got that far, I saw I might as well let her get the whole story off her chest. She's been seein' more and more of this Marion Gray person ever since we moved out here to Harbor Hills. Kind of a plump, fresh-colored party, and more or less bright and entertainin' in her chat when she was in the right mood. I'd often come in and found Vee chucklin' merry over some of the things Miss Gray had been tellin' her. And while she was at our house she seemed full of life and pep. Just the sort that Vee gets along with best. She was the same whenever we met her up at the Ellinses. But outside of that you never saw her anywhere. She wasn't in with the Country Club set, and most of the young married crowd seemed to pass her up too.

I didn't know why. Guess I hadn't thought much about it. I knew she'd lost her father and mother within the last year or so, so I expect I put it down to that as the reason she wasn't mixin' much.

But Vee has all the inside dope. Seems old

man Gray had been a chronic invalid for years. Heart trouble. And durin' all the last of it he'd been promisin' to check out constant, but had kept puttin' it off. Meanwhile Mrs. Gray and Marion had been fillin' in as day and night nurses. He'd been a peevish, grouchy old boy, too, and the more waitin' on he got the more he demanded. Little things. He had to have his food cooked just so, the chair cushions adjusted, the light just right. He had to be read to so many hours a day, and played to, and sung to. He couldn't stand it to be alone, not for half an hour. Didn't want to think, he said. Didn't want to see the women folks knittin' or crocheting: he wanted 'em to be attending to him all the while. He had a little silver bell that he kept hung on his chair arm, and when he rang it one or the other of 'em had to jump. Maybe you know the kind.

Course, the Grays traveled a lot; South in the winter, North in summer—always huntin' a place where he'd feel better, and never findin' it. If he was at the seashore he'd complain that they ought to be in the mountains, and when they got there it wouldn't be a week before he had decided the air was bad for him. They should have known better than to take him there. Most likely one more week would finish him. Another long railroad trip would anyway. So he might as well stay. But wouldn't Marion see the landlord and have those fiendish chil-

dren kept quiet on that tennis court outside? And wouldn't Mother try to make an eggnog that didn't taste like a liquid pancake?

Havin' been humorin' his whims a good deal longer than Marion, and not being very strong herself, Mrs. Gray finally wore out. And almost before they knew anything serious was the matter she was gone. Then it all fell on Marion. Course, if she'd been a paid nurse she never would have stood for this continuous double-time act. Or if there was home inspectors, same as there are for factories, the old man would have been jacked up for violatin' the labor laws. But being only a daughter, there's nobody to step in and remind him that slavery has gone out of style and that in most states the female of the species was gettin' to be a reg'lar person. In fact, there was few who thought Marion was doin' any more'n she had a right to do. Wasn't he her father, and wasn't he payin' all the bills?

"To be sure," adds Vee, "he didn't realize what an old tyrant he was. Nor did Marion. She considered it her duty, and never complained."

"Then I don't see who could have crashed in," said I.

"No one could," said Vee. "That was the pity."

And it seems for the last couple of years the old boy insisted on settlin' down in his home

here, where he could shuffle off comfortable. He'd been mighty slow about it, though, and when he finally headed West it was discovered that, through poor managin' and war conditions, the income they'd been livin' on had shrunk considerable. The fine old house was left free and clear, but there was hardly enough to keep it up unless Marion could rustle a job somewhere.

"And all she knows how to do is nurse," says Vee. "She's not even a trained nurse at that."

"Ain't there anybody she could marry?" I suggests.

"That's the tragic part, Torchy," says Vee. "There is—Mr. Biggles."

"What, 'Puffy' Biggles!" says I. "Not that old prune face with the shiny dome and the baggy eyes?"

Vee says he's the one. He's been hoverin' 'round, like an old buzzard, for three or four years now, playin' chess with the old man while he lasted, but always with his pop-eyes fixed on Marion. And since she's been left alone he'd been callin' reg'lar once a week, urging her to be his tootsy-wootsy No. 3. He was the main wheeze in some third-rate life insurance concern, I believe, and fairly well off, and he owned a classy place over near the Country Club. But he had a 44 belt, a chin like a pelican, and he was so short of breath that every-

body called him "Puffy" Biggles. Besides, he was fifty.

"A hot old Romeo he'd make for a nice girl like that," says I. "Is he her best bet? Ain't there any second choice?"

"There was another," says Vee. "Rather a nice chap, too—that Mr. Ellery Prescott, who played the organ so well and was some kind of a broker. You remember?"

"Sure!" says I. "The one who pulled down a captain's commission at Plattsburg. Did she have him on the string?"

"They had been friends for a long time," says Vee. "Were as good as engaged once; though how he managed to see much of Marion I can't imagine, with Mr. Gray so crusty toward him. You see, he didn't play chess. Anyway, he finally gave up. I suppose he's at the front now, and even if he ever should come back—— Well, Marion seldom mentions him. I'm sure, though, that they thought a good deal of each other. Poor thing! She was crazy to go across as a canteen worker. And now she doesn't know what to do. Of course, there's always Biggles. If we could only save her from that!"

At which remark I grows skittish. I didn't like the way she was gazin' at me. "Ah, come, Vee!" says I. "Lay off that rescue stuff. Adoptin' female orphans of over thirty, or matin' 'em up appropriate is way out of my

line. Suppose we pass resolutions of regret in Marion's case, and let it ride at that?"

"At least," goes on Vee, "we can do a little something to cheer her up. Mrs. Robert Ellins has asked her for dinner tomorrow night. Us too."

"Oh, I'll go that far," says I, "although the last I knew about the Ellinses' kitchen squad, it's takin' a chance."

I was some little prophet, too. I expect Mrs. Robert hadn't been havin' much worse a time with her help than most folks, but three cooks inside of ten days was goin' some. Lots of people had been longer'n that without any, though. But when any pot wrestler can step into a munition works or an airplane factory and pull down her three or four dollars a day for an eight-hour shift, what can you expect?

Answer: What we got that night at the Ellinses'. The soup had been scorched once, but it had been cooled off nicely before it got to us. The fish had been warmed through—barely. And the roast lamb tasted like it had been put through an embalmin' process. But the cookin' was high art compared to the service, for since their butler had quit to become a crack riveter in a shipyard they've been havin' maids do their plate jugglin'.

And this wide-built fairy, with the eyes that didn't track, sure was constructed for anything but glidin' graceful around a dinner table. For

one thing, she had the broken-arch roll in her gait, and when she pads in through the swing-door she's just as easy in her motion as a cow walkin' the quarter-deck with a heavy sea runnin'. Every now and then she'd scuff her toe in the rug, and how some of us escaped a soup or a gravy bath I can't figure out. Maybe we were in luck.

Also, she don't mind reachin' in front of you and sidewipin' your ear with her elbow. Accidents like that were merry little jokes to her.

"Ox-cuse me, Mister!" she'd pipe out shrill and childish, and then indulged in a maniac giggle that would get Mrs. Robert grippin' the chair arms.

She liked to be chatty and folksy while she was servin', too. Her motto seemed to be, "Eat hearty and give the house a good name." If you didn't, she tried to coax you into it, or it into you.

"Oh, do have some more of th' meat, Miss," she says to Vee. "And another potato, now. Just one more, Miss."

And all Mrs. Robert can do is pink up, and when she's out of hearin' apologize for her. "As you see," says Mrs. Robert, "she is hardly a trained waitress."

"She'd make a swell auctioneer, though," I suggests.

"No doubt," says Mrs. Robert. "And I suppose I am fortunate enough to have anyone in

the kitchen at all, even to do the cooking—such as it is.”

“You ain’t lonesome in feelin’ that way,” says I. “It seems to be a general complaint.”

Which brings out harrowin’ tales of war-wrecked homes, where no buttling had been done for months, where chauffeurs and gardeners were only represented by stars on the service flag, and from which even personal maids had gone to be stenographers and nurses. But chiefly it was the missin’ cook who was mourned. Some had quit to follow their men to trainin’ camps, a lot had copped out better payin’ jobs, and others had been lured to town, where they could get the fake war extras hot off the press and earn higher wages as well.

Course, there were some substitute cooks—reformed laundresses, raw amateurs and back numbers that should have reached the age limit long before. And pretty awful cookin’ they were gettin’ away with. Vee had heard of one who boiled the lettuce and sent in dog biscuit one mornin’ for breakfast cereal. Miss Gray told what happened at the Pemberton Brookses when their kitchen queen had left for Bridgeport, where she had a hubby makin’ seventy-five dollars a week. The Brookses had lived for three days on cream toast and sardines, which was all the upstairs girl had in her culinary repertoire.

“And look at me,” added Marion, “with our

old family cook, who can make the best things in the world, and I can hardly afford to keep her! But I couldn't drive her away if I tried."

Course, with our havin' Professor and Madame Battou, the old French couple we'd annexed over a year ago in town, we had no kick comin'. Not even the sugar and flour shortage seemed to trouble them, and our fancy meals continued regular as clock work. But on the way home Vee and I got to talkin' about what hard times the neighbors was havin'.

"I guess what they need out here," says I, "is one of them army kitchens, that would roll around two or three times a day deliverin' hot nourishment from door to door."

And I'd hardly finished what I'd meant for a playful little remark before Vee stops sudden, right in the middle of the road, and lets out an excited squeal.

"Torchy!" says she. "Why on earth didn't you suggest that before?"

"Because this foolish streak has just hit me," says I.

"But it's the very thing," says she, clappin' her hands.

"Eh?" says I, gawpin'.

"For Marion," says she. "Don't you see?"

"But she's no perambulatin' rotisserie, is she?" says I.

"She might be," says Vee. "And she shall."

“Oh, very well,” says I. “If you’ve decided it that way, I expect she will. But I don’t quite get you.”

When Vee first connects with one of her bright ideas, though, she’s apt to be a little puzzlin’ in her remarks about it. As a matter of fact, her scheme is a bit hazy, but she’s sure it’s a winner.

“Listen, Torchy,” says she. “Here are all these Harbor Hills people—perhaps a hundred families—many of them with poor cooks, some with none at all. And there is Marion with that perfectly splendid old Martha of hers, who could cook for all of them.”

“Oh, I see,” says I. “Marion hangs out a table-board sign?”

“Stupid!” says Vee. “She does nothing of the sort. People don’t want to go out for their meals; they want to eat at home. Well, Marion brings them their meals, all deliciously cooked, all hot, and ready to serve.”

“With the kitchen range loaded on a truck and Martha passin’ out soup and roasts over the tailboard, eh?” says I.

But once more I’ve missed. No, the plan is to get a lot of them army containers, such as they send hot chow up to the front trenches in; have ’em filled by Martha at home, and delivered by Marion to her customers.

“It might work,” says I. “It would need some capital, though. She’d have to invest in

a lot of containers, and she'd need a motor truck."

"I will buy those," says Vee. "I'm going in with her."

"Oh, come!" says I. "You'd look nice, wouldn't you?"

"You mean that people would talk?" comes back Vee. "What do I care? It's quite as patriotic and quite as necessary as Red Cross work, or anything else. It would be scientific food conservation, man-power saving, all that sort of thing. And think what a wonderful thing it would be for the neighborhood."

"Maybe Marion wouldn't see it that way," I suggests. "Drivin' a dinner truck around might not appeal to her. You got to remember she's more or less of an old maid. She might have notions."

"Trust her," says Vee. "But I mean to have my plan all worked out before I tell her a word. When you go to town tomorrow, Torch, I want you to find out all about those containers—how much the various compartments will hold, and how much they cost. Also about a light motor truck. There will be other details, too, which I will be thinking about."

Yes, there were other details. Nobody seemed to know much about such a business. It had been tried in places. Vee heard of something of the sort that was being tested up on the East Side. So it was three or four days

before she was ready to spring this new career on Marion. But one night, after dinner, she announces that she's all set and drags me down there with her. Outside of the old Gray house we finds a limousine, with the driver dozin' inside.

"It's the Biggles car!" whispers Vee. "Oh, what if he should be—— Come, Torchy! Quick!"

"You wouldn't break in on a fond clinch, would you?" I asks.

"If it came to that, certainly," says Vee, pushin' the front-door button determined.

I expect she would have, too. But Biggles hadn't got that far—not quite. He's on the mat all right, though, with his fat face sort of flushed and his eyes popped more'n usual. And Marion Gray seems to be sort of fussed, too. She is some tinted up under the eyes, and when she sees who it is she glances at Vee sort of appealin'.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to interrupt," says Vee, marchin' right in and takin' Marion by the arm. "You'll pardon me, I hope, Mr. Biggles, but I must speak to Miss Gray at once about—about something very important."

And almost before "Puffy" Biggles knows what's happened he's left staring at an empty armchair.

In the cozy little library Vee pushes Marion down on a window seat and camps beside her.

Trust Vee for jabbin' the probe right in, too.

"Tell me," she demands whispery, "was—was he at it again?"

Marion pinks up more'n ever. And, say, with them shy brown eyes of hers, and all the curves, she ain't so hard to look at. "Yes," admits Marion. "You see, I had promised to give him a final answer tonight."

"But surely, Marion," says Vee, "you'd never in the world tell him that you——"

"I don't know," breaks in Marion, her voice trembly. "There seems to be nothing else."

"Isn't there, though!" says Vee. "Just you wait until you hear."

And with that she plunges into a rapid outline sketch of this dinner dispensary stunt, quotin' facts and figures and givin' a profit estimate that sounded more or less generous to me.

"So you see," she goes on enthusiastic, "you could keep your home, and you could keep Martha, and you would be doing something perfectly splendid for the whole community. Besides, you would be entirely independent of—of everyone."

"But do you think I could do it?" asks Marion.

"I know you could," says Vee. "Anyway, we could between us. I will furnish the capital, and keep the accounts and help you plan the daily menus. You will do the marketing and

delivering. Martha will do the cooking. And there you are! We may have to start with only a few family orders at first, but others will come in fast. You'll see."

By that time Marion was catching the fever. Her eyes brighten and her chin comes up.

"I believe we could do it," says she.

"And you're willing to try?" asks Vee.

Marion nods.

"Then," says Vee, "Mr. Biggles ought to be told that he needn't wait around any longer."

"Oh, I don't see how I can," wails Marion. "He—he's such a——"

"A sticker, eh? I know," says Vee. "And it's a shame that he should have another chance to bother you. Torchy, don't you suppose you could do it for her?"

"What?" says I. "Break it to Biggles? Why, I could do it swell. Leave it to me. I'll shunt him on the siding so quick he won't know he's ever been on the main track."

I don't waste any diplomatic language doin' it, either. On my way in where he's waiting I passes through the hall and gathers up his new derby and yellow gloves, holdin' 'em behind me as I breaks in on him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Biggles," says I, "but it's all off."

"I—I beg pardon?" says he, gazin' at me fish-eyed and stupid.

"Ah, let's not run around in circles," says I.

"Miss Gray presents her compliments, and all that sort of stuff, but she's goin' into another line. If you must know, she's going to bust up the cook combine, and from now on she'll be mighty busy. Get me?"

Biggles stiffens and stares at me haughty. "I don't in the least understand anything of all this," says he. "I had an appointment with Marion for this evening; something quite important to—to us both. I may as well tell you that I had asked Marion a momentous question. I am waiting for her answer."

"Well, here it is," says I, holdin' out the hat.

Biggles, he gurgles something indignant and turns purple in the gills, but he ends by snatchin' away the derby and marchin' stiff to the door.

"Understand," says he, with his hand on the knob, "I do not accept your impertinence as a reply. I—I shall see Marion again."

"Sure you will," says I. "She'll be around to get your dinner order early next week."

"Bah!" says Biggles, bangin' the door behind him.

But, say, inside of five minutes he'd been wiped off the slate, and them two girls was plannin' their hot-food campaign as busy and excited as if it was Marion's church weddin' they were doping out. It's after midnight before they breaks away, too.

You know Vee, though. She ain't one to start things and then quit. She's a stayer. And some grand little hustler, too. By Monday mornin' the Harbor Hills Community Kitchen Co. was a going concern. And before the week was out they had more'n forty families on the standin' order list, with new squads of soup scorchers bein' fired every day.

What got a gasp out of me was the first time I gets sight of Marion Gray in her working rig. Nothing old-maidish about that costume. Not so you'd notice. She's gone the limit—khaki riding pants, leather leggings and a zippy cloth cap cut on the overseas pattern. None of them Women's Motor Corps girls had anything on her. And maybe she ain't some picture, too, as she jumps in behind the wheel of the truck and steps on the gas pedal!

Also, I was some jarred to learn that the enterprise was a payin' one almost from the start. Folks was just tickled to death with havin' perfectly good meals, well cooked, well seasoned and pipin' hot, set down at their back doors prompt every day, with no fractious fryin'-pan pirates growlin' around the kitchens, and no local food profiteers soakin' 'em with big weekly bills.

This has been goin' on a month, when one day as I comes home Vee greets me with a flyin' tackle.

"Oh, Torchy!" she squeals, "what do you think has happened?"

"I know," says I. "Baby's cut a tooth."

"No," says she. "It's—it's about Marion."

"Oh!" says I. "She ain't bumped somebody with the truck, has she?"

"How absurd!" says Vee. "But, listen, Captain Ellery Prescott has come back."

"What! The old favorite?" says I. "But I thought he was over with Pershing?"

"Not yet," says Vee. "He has been out at some Western camp training recruits all this time. But now he has his orders. He is to sail very soon. And he's seen Marion."

"Has he?" said I. "Did it give him a jolt, or what?"

Vee giggles and pulls my head down so she can whisper in my ear. "He thought her perfectly stunning, as she is, of course. And they're to be married day after tomorrow."

"Z-z-z-zing!" says I. "That puts a crimp in the ready-made dinner business, I expect."

"Not at all," says Vee. "Until he comes back, after the war, Marion is going to carry on."

"Anyway," says I, "it ends 'Puffy' Biggles as an impendin' tragedy, don't it? And I expect that's worth while, too."

CHAPTER II

OLD HICKORY BATS UP ONE

ANYBODY would most think I'd been with the Corrugated Trust long enough to know that Old Hickory Ellins generally gets what he wants, whether it's quick action from an office boy or a two-thirds majority vote from the board of directors. But once in a while I seem to forget, and shortly after that I'm wonderin' if it was a tank I went up against so solid, or if someone threw the bond safe at me.

What let me in wrong this last time was a snappy little remark I got shot my way right here in the general offices. I was just back from a three-days' chase after a delayed shipment of bridge girders and steel wheelbarrows that was billed for France in a rush, and I'd got myself disliked by most of the traffic managers between here and Altoona, to say nothing of freight conductors, yard bosses and so on. But I'd untangled those nine cars and got 'em movin' toward the North River, and now I was steamin' through a lot of office detail that had piled up while I was gone. I'd lunched luxurious on an egg sandwich and a war doughnut that Vincent had brought up to me from the

arcade automat, and I'd 'phoned Vee that I might not be out home until the 11:13, when in blows this potty party with the poison ivy leaves on his shoulder straps and demands to see Mr. Ellins at once. Course, it's me with my heels together doin' the zippy salute.

"Sorry, major," says I, "but Mr. Ellins won't be in until 10:30."

"Hah!" says he, like bitin' off a piece of glass. "And who are you, lieutenant?"

"Special detail from the Ordnance Department, sir," says I.

"Oh, you are, eh?" he snorts. "Another bomb-proofer! Well, tell Mr. Ellins I shall be back at 11:15—if this sector hasn't been captured in the meantime," and as he double-quickens out he near runs down Mr. Piddie, our rubber-stamp office manager, who has towed him in.

As for me, I stands there swallowin' air bubbles until my red-haired disposition got below the boiling point once more. Then I turns to Piddie.

"You heard, didn't you?" says I.

Piddie nods. "But I don't quite understand," says he. "What did he mean by—er—bomb-proofer?"

"Just rank flattery, Piddie," says I. "The rankest kind. It's his way of indicatin' that I'm a yellow dog hidin' under a roll-top desk for fear someone'll kick me out where a parlor

Pomeranian will look cross at me. Excuse me if I don't seem to work up a blush. Fact is, though, I'm gettin' kind of used to it."

"Oh, I say, though!" protests Piddie. "Why, everyone knows that you——"

"That's where you're dead wrong, Piddie," I breaks in. "What everybody really knows is that while most of the young hicks who've been Plattsburged into uniforms are already across Periscope Pond helpin' swat the Hun, I'm still floatin' around here with nothing worse than car dust on my tailor-built khaki. Why, even them bold Liberty bond patriots who commute on the 8:03 are tired of asking me when I'm going to be sent over to tell Pershing how it ought to be done. But when it comes to an old crab of a swivel chair major chuckin' 'bomb-proofer' in my teeth—well, I guess that'll be about all. Here's where I get a revise or quit. Right here."

And it was sentiments like that, only maybe worded not quite so brash, that I passed out to Old Hickory a little later on. He listens about as sympathetic as a traffic cop hearin' why you tried to rush the stop signal.

"I think we have discussed all that before, young man," says he. "The War Department has recognized that, as the head of an essential industry, I am entitled to a private secretary; also that you might prove more useful with a

commission than without one. And I rather think you have. So there you are."

"Excuse me, Mr. Ellins," says I, "but I can't see it that way. I don't know whether I'm private seccing or getting ready for a masquerade ball. Any one-legged man could do what I'm doing. I'm ready to chuck the commission and enlist."

"Really!" says he. "Well, in the first place, my son, a war-time commission is something one doesn't chuck back at the United States government because of any personal whim. It isn't being done. And then again, you tried enlisting once, didn't you, and were turned down?"

"But that was early in the game," says I, "when the recruiting officers weren't passing any but young Sandows. I could get by now. Have a heart, Mr. Ellins. Lemme make a try."

He chews his cigar a minute, drums thoughtful on the mahogany desk, and then seems to have a bright little idea.

"Very well, Torchy," says he, "we'll see what my friend, Major Wellby, can do for you when he comes in."

"Him!" says I. "Why, he'd do anything for me that the law didn't stop him from."

And sure enough, when the major drifts in again them two was shut in the private office for more'n half an hour before I'm called in. I could guess just by the way the major glares

fond at me that if he could work it he'd get me a nice, easy job mowin' the grass in No Man's Land, or some snap like that.

"Huh!" says he, givin' me the night court up and down. "Wants an active command, does he? And his training has been what? Four years as office boy, three as private secretary! It's no use, Ellins. We're not fighting this war with waste baskets or typewriters, you know."

"Oh, come, major!" puts in Old Hickory. "Why be unreasonable about this? I will admit that you may be right, so far as it's being folly to send this young man to the front. But I do insist that as a lieutenant he is rather useful just where he is."

"Bah!" snorts the major. "So is the farmer who's raising hogs and corn. He's useful. But we don't put shoulder straps on him, or send him to France in command of a company. For jobs like that we try to find youngsters who've been trained to handle men; who know how to get things done. What we don't want is—eh? Someone calling me on the 'phone? All right. Yes, this is Major Wellby. What? Oh, it can't be done today! Yes, yes! I understand all that. But see here, captain, that transport is due to sail at—hey, central! I say, central! Oh, what's the use?"

And as the major bangs up the receiver his face looks like a strawb'ry shortcake just ready

to serve. Somehow Mr. Ellins seems to be enjoyin' the major's rush of temperament to the ears. Anyhow, there's a familiar flicker under them bushy eyebrows of his and I ain't at all surprised when he remarks soothin': "I gather, major, that someone can't seem to get something done."

"Precisely," says the major, moppin' a few pearly beads off his shiny dome. "And when a regular army captain makes up his mind that a thing can't be done—well, it's hopeless, that's all. In this instance, however, I fear he's right, worse luck!"

"Anyway," suggests Mr. Ellins, "he has made you think that the thing is impossible, eh?"

"Think!" growls the major, glancin' suspicious at Old Hickory. "I say, Ellins, what are you getting at? Still harping on that red tape notion, are you? Perhaps you imagine this to be a case where, if you could only turn loose your wonderful organization, you could work a miracle?"

"No, major," says Old Hickory. "We don't claim to work in miracles; but when we decide that a thing ought to be done at a certain time—well, generally it gets done."

"Just like that, eh?" grins the major sarcastic. "Really, Ellins, you big business men are too good to be true. But see here; why not tap your amazing efficiency for my benefit.

This little job, for instance, which one of our poor misguided captains reports as impossible within the time limit. I suppose you would merely press a button and——”

“Not even that,” breaks in Mr. Ellins. “I would simply turn it over to Torchy here—and he’d do it.”

The major glances at me careless and shrugs his shoulders. “My dear Ellins,” says he, “you probably don’t realize it, but that’s the sort of stuff which adds to the horrors of war. Here you haven’t the vaguest idea as to what——”

“Perhaps,” cuts in Old Hickory, “but I’ll bet you a hundred to twenty-five.”

“Taken,” says the major. Then he turns to me. “When can you start, lieutenant?”

“As soon as I know where I’m starting for, sir,” says I.

“How convenient,” says he. “Well, then, here is an order on the New York Telephone Co. for five spools of wire which you’ll find stored somewhere on Central Park South. See if you can get ’em.”

“Yes, sir,” says I. “And suppose I can?”

“Report to me at the Plutoria before 5:30 this afternoon,” says he. “I shall be having tea there. Ellins, you’d better be on hand, too, so that I can collect that hundred.”

And that’s all there was to it. I’m handed a slip of paper carrying the Quartermaster

General's O. K., and while these two old sports are still chucklin' at each other I've grabbed my uniform cap off the roll-top and have caught an express elevator.

Course, I expected a frame-up. All them army officers are hard boiled eggs when it comes to risking real money, and I knew the major must think his twenty-five was as safe as if he'd invested it in thrift stamps. As for Old Hickory Ellins, he'd toss away a hundred any time on the chance of pulling a good bluff. So I indulges in a shadowy little grin myself and beats it up town.

Simple enough to locate them spools of wire. Oh, yes. They're right in the middle of the block between Sixth and Broadway, tucked away inconspicuous among as choice a collection of contractor's junk as you can find anywhere in town, and that's sayin' a good deal. But maybe you've noticed what's been happenin' along there where Fifty-ninth street gets high-toned? Looks like an earthquake had wandered by, but it's only that down below they're connectin' the new subway with another East river tunnel. And if there's anything in the way of old derricks, or scrap iron, or wooden beams, or construction sheds that ain't been left lying around on top it's because they didn't have it on hand to leave.

Cute little things, them spools are, too; about six feet high, three wide, and weighin' a ton

or so each, I should judge. And to make the job of movin' 'em all the merrier an old cement mixer has been at work right next to 'em and the surplus concrete has been thrown out until they've been bedded in as solid as so many bridge piers. I climbs around and takes a look.

"How cunnin'!" says I. "Why, they'd make the Rock of Ages look like a loose front tooth. And all I got to do is pull 'em up by the roots, one at a time. Ha, ha! Likewise, tee-hee!"

It sized up like a bad case of bee bite with me at the wrong end of the stinger. Still, I was just mulish enough to stick around. I had nearly three hours left before I'd have to listen to the major's mirthsome cackle, and I might as well spend part of it thinkin' up fool schemes. So I walks around that cluster of cement-set spools some more. I even climbs on top of one and gazes up and down the block.

They were still doing things to make it look less like a city street and more like the ruins of Louvain. Down near the Fifth Avenue gates was the fenced-in mouth of a shaft that led somewhere into the bowels of Manhattan. And while I was lookin' out climbs a dago, unrolls a dirty red flag, and holds up the traffic until a dull "boom" announces that the offensive is all over for half an hour or so. Up towards Columbus Circle more industry was goin' on. A steam roller was smoothin' out a strip of pavement that had just been relaid,

and nearer by a gang was tearin' up more of the asphalt. I got kind of interested in the way they was doin' it, too. You know, they used to do this street wreckin' with picks and crowbars, but this crowd seemed to have more modern methods. They was usin' three of these pneumatic drills and they sure were ripping it up slick and speedy. About then I noticed that their compressor was chugging away nearly opposite me and that the lines of hose stretched out fifty feet or more.

"Say!" says I jerky and breathless, but to nobody in particular. I was just registerin' the fact that I'd had a sudden thought.

A few minutes before, too, I'd seen a squad of rookies wander past and into the park. I remembered noticin' what a husky, tanned lot they were, and from their hat cords that they belonged to the artillery branch. Well, that was enough. In a flash I'd shinned over the stone wall and was headin' 'em off.

You know how these cantonment delegations wander around town aimless when they're dumped down here on leave waiting to be shunted off quiet onto some transport? No friends, mighty little money, and nothing to do but tramp the streets or hang around the Y. They actually looked kind of grateful when I stops 'em and returns their salute. As luck would have it there's a top sergeant in the bunch, so I don't have to make a reg'lar speech.

"It's this way, sergeant," says I. "I'm looking for a few volunteers."

"There's ten of us, sir," says he, "with not a thing on our hands but time."

"Then perhaps you'll help me put over something on a boss ditch digger," says I. "It's nothing official, but it may help General Pershing a whole lot."

"We sure will," says the sergeant. "Now then, men. 'Shun! And forget those dope sticks for a minute. How'll you have 'em, lieutenant—twos or fours?"

"Twos will look more impressive, I guess," says I. "And just follow me."

"Fall in!" says the sergeant. "By twos! Right about! March!"

So when I rounds into the street again and bears down on this gang foreman I has him bug-eyed from the start. He don't seem to know whether he's being pinched or not.

"What's your name, my man?" says I, wavin' the Q. M.'s order threatenin'.

It's Mike something or other, as I could have guessed without him near chokin' to get it out.

"Very well, Mike," I goes on, as important as I knew how. "See those spools over there that you people have done your best to bury? Well, those have been requisitioned from the Telephone Company by the U. S. army. Here's the order. Now I want you to get busy with your drill gang and cut 'em loose."

"But—but see here, boss," sputters Mike, "'tis a private contract they're workin' on and I couldn't be after——"

"Couldn't, eh?" says I. "Lemme tell you something. That wire has to go on a transport that's due to sail the first thing in the morning. It's for the Signal Corps and they need it to stretch a headquarters' line into Berlin."

"Sorry, boss," said Mike, "but I wouldn't dast to——"

"Sergeant," says I, "do your duty."

Uh-huh! That got Mike all right. And when we'd yanked him up off his knees and convinced him that he wouldn't be shot for an hour or so yet he's so thankful that he gets those drills to work in record time.

It was a first-class hunch, if I do have to admit it myself. You should have seen how neat them rapid fire machines begun unbuttonin' those big wooden spools, specially after a couple of our doughboy squad, who'd worked pneumatic riveters back home, took hold of the drills. Others fished some hand sledges and crowbars out of a tool shed and helped the work along, while Mike encourages his gang with a fluent line of foreman repartee.

Course, I didn't have the whole thing doped out at the start, but gettin' away with this first stab only showed me how easy it was if you wasn't bashful about callin' for help. From then on I didn't let much assistance get away

from me, either. Yankin' the spools out to the street level by hookin' on the steam roller was my next play, but commandeerin' a sand blast outfit that was at work halfway down the block was all Mike's idea.

"They need smoothin' up a bit, boss," says he.

And inside of half an hour we had all five of them spools lookin' new and bright, like they'd just come from the mill.

"What next, sir?" asks the sergeant.

"Why," says I, "the fussy old major who's so hot for getting these things is waiting at the Plutoria, about ten blocks down. Maybe he wants 'em there. I wonder if we could——"

"Sure!" says the sergeant. "This heavy gun bunch can move anything. Here! I'll show 'em how."

With that he runs a crowbar through the center of one of the spools, puts a man on either side to push, and rolls it along as easy as wheelin' a baby carriage.

"Swell tactics, sergeant," says I. "And just for that I'm goin' to provide your squad with a little music. Might as well do this in style, eh? Wait a minute."

And it wasn't long before I was back from another dash into the park towin' half a drum corps that I'd borrowed from some Junior Naval Reserves that was drillin' over on the ballfield.

So it was some nifty little parade that I finally lines up to lead down Fifth Avenue. First there's me, then the drum corps, then the sergeant and his men rollin' them spools of wire. We strings out for more'n a block.

You'd think New Yorkers were so used to parades by this time that you couldn't get 'em stretchin' their necks for anything less'n a regiment of hand-picked heroes. They've seen the French Blue Devils at close range, gawped at the Belgians, and chummed with the Anzacs. But, say, this spool-pushin' stunt was a new one on 'em. Folks just lined the curb and stared. Then some bird starts to cheer and it's taken up all down the line, just on faith.

"Hey, pipe the new rollin' tanks!" shouts someone.

"Gwan!" sings out another wise guy. "Them's wooden bombs they're goin' to drop on Willie."

It's the first time I've been counted in on any of this hooray stuff, and I can't say I hated it. At the same time I tried not to look too chesty. But when I wheeled the procession into the side street and got 'em bunched two deep in front of the Plutoria's carriage entrance I ain't sure but what I was wearin' kind of a satisfied grin.

Not for long, though. The six-foot taxi starter in the rear admiral's uniform jumps right in with the prompt protest. He wants

to know what the blinkety-blink I think I'm doin', blockin' up his right of way in that fashion.

"You can't do it! Take 'em away!" says he.

"Ah, keep the lid on, old Goulash," says I.

"Sergeant, if he gets messy, roll one of those spools on him. I'll be back shortly."

With that I blows into the Plutoria and hunts up the tea room. The major's there, all right, and Mr. Ellins, also a couple of ladies. They're just bein' served with Oolong and caviar sandwiches.

"Ah!" says the major, as he spots me.

"Our gallant young office lieutenant, eh? Well, sir, anything to report?"

"The spools are outside, sir," says I.

"Wh—a—at!" he gasps.

"Where'll you have 'em put, sir?" says I.

About then, though, in trails the taxi starter, the manager and a brace of house detectives.

"That's him!" says the starter, pointin' me out. "He's the one that's blockin' traffic."

I will say this for the major, though, he's a good sport. He comes right to the front and takes all the blame.

"I'm responsible," he tells the manager.

"It's perfectly all right, too. Military necessity, sir. Well, perhaps you don't like it, but I'll have you understand, sir, I could block off your whole street if I wished. So clear out, all of you."

"Why, Horace!" puts in one of the ladies, grabbin' him by the arm.

"Yes, yes, my dear," says the major. "I know. No scene. Certainly not. Only these hotel persons must be put in their place. And if you will excuse me for a moment I'll see what can be done. Come, lieutenant. I want to get a look at those spools myself."

Well, he did. "But—but I understood," says he, "that they were stuck in concrete or something of the kind."

"Yes, sir," says I. "We had to unstick 'em. Pneumatic drills and a steam roller. Very simple."

"Great Scott!" says he. "Why didn't that fool captain think of—— But, see here, I don't want 'em here. Now, if we could only get them to Pier 14——"

"That would be a long way to roll 'em, sir," says I, "but it could be done. Loadin' 'em on a couple of army trucks would be easier, though. There's a Quartermaster's depot at the foot of Fifty-seventh Street, you know."

"So there is," says he. "I'll call them up. Come in, will you, lieutenant and—and join us at tea? You've earned it, I think."

Three minutes more and the major announces that the trucks are on the way.

"Which means, Ellins," he adds, "that you win your twenty-five. Here you are."

"If you don't mind," says Old Hickory, "I'll

keep this and pass on my hundred to Torch here. He might like to entertain his volunteer squad with it."

Did I? Say, when I got through showin' that bunch of far West artillery husks how to put in a real pleasant evening along Broadway there wasn't enough change left to buy a sportin' extra. But they'd had chow in the giddiest lobster palace under the white lights, they'd occupied two boxes at the zippiest girl show in town and they was loaded down with cigarettes and chocolate enough to last 'em clear to France.

The next mornin', when Old Hickory comes paddin' into the general offices, he stops to pat me friendly on the shoulder.

"I think we have succeeded in revising the major's opinion," he remarks, "as to the general utility of bomb-proofers in certain instances."

I grins up at him. "Then," says I, "do I get a recommend for active duty within jabbin' distance of the Huns?"

"We did consider that," says Old Hickory, "but the decision was just as I suspected from the first. The major says it would be a shame to waste you on anything less than a divisional command, and there aren't enough of those to go around. Chiefly, though, he thinks that anyone who is able to get things done in New York in the wizard-like way that you can should be

kept within call of Governor's Island. So I fear, Torchy, that you and I will have to go on serving our country right here."

"All right, Mr. Ellins," says I. "I expect you win—as per usual."

CHAPTER III

TORCHY PULLS THE DEEP STUFF

COURSE, I didn't know what Old Hickory was stackin' me up against when he calls me into the private office and tells me to shake hands with this Mr. McCrea. Kind of a short, stubby party he is, with a grayish mustache and sort of sleepy gray eyes. He's one of these slow motioned, quiet talking ginks, with restful ways, such as would fit easy into a swivel chair and hold down a third vice-president's job for life. Or he might be a champion chess player.

So when the boss goes on to say how Mr. McCrea is connected with the Washington sleuth bureau I expect I must have gawped at him a bit curious. Some relic of the old office force, was my guess; a hold-over from the times when the S. S. people called it a big day if they could locate a lead nickel fact'ry in Mulberry Street, or drop on a few Chink laundrymen bein' run in from Canada in crates. Maybe he was a thumb-print expert.

"Howdy," says I, glancin' up at the clock to see if the prospects was good for makin' the 5:17 out to Harbor Hills.

"I am told you know the town rather well,"

suggests McCrea, sort of mild and apologetic.

"Me!" says I. "Oh, I can usually find my way back to Broadway even in foggy weather."

He indulges in a flickery little smile. "I also understand," he goes on, "that you have shown yourself to be somewhat quick witted in emergencies."

"I must have a good press agent, then," says I, glancin' accusin' at Mr. Ellins.

But Old Hickory shakes his head. "I suspect that was my friend, Major Wellby," says he.

"Oh!" says I. "The one I rescued the wire spools for? A lucky break, that was."

"Mr. McCrea is working on something rather more important," goes on Old Hickory, "and if you can help him in any way I trust you will do it."

"Sure," says I. "What's the grand little idea?"

He don't seem enthusiastic about openin' up, McCrea, and I don't know as I blame him much. After he's fished a note book out of his inside pocket he stops and looks me over sort of doubtful. "Perhaps I had better say at the start," says he, "that some of our best men have been on this job for several weeks."

"Nursin' it along, eh?" says I.

That brings a smothered chuckle from Old Hickory. But Mr. McCrea don't seem so tickled over it. In fact, he develops a furrow

between the eyes and his next remark ain't quite so soothin'.

"No doubt if they could have had the assistance of your rapid fire mentality a little sooner," says he, "it would have been but a matter of a few hours."

"There's no telling," says I. "Are you one of the new squad?"

Here Old Hickory chokes down another gurgle and breaks in hasty with: "Mr. McCrea, Torch, is assistant chief of the bureau, you know."

"Gosh!" says I, under my breath. "My mistake, sir. And I expect I'd better back out now, while the backin's good."

"Wouldn't that be rather hard on us?" asks McCrea, liftin' his eyebrows sarcastic. "Besides, think how disappointed the major will be if we fail to make use of such remarkable ability as he has assured us you possess."

It's a kid, all right, even if he does put it so smooth. And by the twinkle in Old Hickory's eye I can see he's enjoyin' it just as much as McCrea. Nothing partial about the boss. His sympathies are always with the good performer. And rather than let this top-liner sleuth put it over me so easy I takes a chance on shootin' a little more bull.

"Oh, if you're goin' to feel bad over it," says I, "course I got to help you out. Now

what part of Manhattan is it that's got your super-Sherlocks guessin' so hard?"

He smiles condescendin' and unfolds a neat little diagram showin' a Broadway corner and part of the cross street. "It is a matter of three policemen and a barber shop," says he. "Here, in the basement of this hotel on the corner, is the barber shop."

"Yes, I remember," says I. "Otto something or other runs it. And on the side, I expect, he does plain and fancy spyin', eh?"

"We should be much interested to have you furnish proof of that," says McCrea. "What we suspect, however, is something slightly different. We believe that the place is rather a clearing house for spy information. News seems to reach there and to leave there. What we wish to know is, how."

"Had anyone on the inside?" I asks.

"Yes, that bright little idea occurred to us," says McCrea. "One of our men has been operating a chair there for three weeks. He discovered nothing of importance. Also we have had the place watched from the outside, to no purpose. So you see how crude our methods must have been."

"Oh, I ain't knockin' 'em," says I. "Maybe they was out of luck. But what about the three cops?"

"Their beats terminate at this corner," says

McCrea, "one from uptown, one from downtown, and the third from the east. And we have good reason to suppose that one of the three is crooked. Now if you can tell us which one, and how information can come and go——"

"I get you," I breaks in. "All you want of me is the answer to a lot of questions you've been all the fall workin' up. That's some he-sized order, ain't it?"

McCrea shrugs his shoulder. "As I mentioned, I think," says he, "it was Major Wellby who suggested your assistance; and as the major happens to enjoy the confidence of—well, someone who is a person of considerable importance in Washington——"

"Uh-huh!" says I. "It's a case of my bein' wished on you and you standin' by with the laugh when I fall down. Oh, very well! I'll be the goat. But the major's a good scout, just the same, and I don't mean to throw him without making a stab. How long do I get on this?"

"Oh, as long as you like," says McCrea.

"Thanks," says I. "Where do I find you when I want to turn in a report, blank or otherwise?"

He gives me the name of his hotel and after collectin' the diagram of the mystery I does a slow exit to my desk in the next office. I was sittin' there half an hour later with my hair rumpled, makin' a noise like deep thinkin',

when in walks the hand of fate steppin' heavy on his heels, as usual.

Not that I suspected at the time this Barry Wales could be anything much more than a good natured pest. He didn't used to be even that. No, the change in Barry is only another little item in the score we got against the Kaiser; for back in the days before we went into the war Barry was just one of Mr. Robert's club friends who dropped around casual to date up for an after-luncheon game of billiards, or tip him off to a new cabaret act that was worth engagin' a table next to the gold ropes. Besides, holdin' quite a block of Corrugated stock, I expect Barry figured it as a day's work when he got me to show him the last semi-annual report and figure out what his dividends would tot up to. Outside of that he was a bar-hound and more or less of a window ornament.

But the war sure had made a mess of Barry. I don't mean that he went over and got shell shocked or gassed. Too far past thirty for that, and he had too many things the matter with him. Oh, I had all the details direct; bad heart, plumbing out of whack, nerves frazzled from too many all-night sessions. He was in that shape to begin with. But he didn't start braggin' about it until so many of his bunch got to makin' themselves useful in different ways. Mr. Robert, for instance, gettin' sent

out in command of a coast patrol boat; others breakin' into Red Cross work, ship buildin' and so on. Barry claims he tried 'em all and was turned down.

But is he discouraged? Not Barry. If they won't put him in uniform, with cute little dew-dads on his shoulder, or let him wear \$28 put-tees that will take a mahogany finish, there's nothing to prevent him from turnin' loose that mighty intellect of his and inventin' new ways to win the war. So when he's sittin' there in his favorite window at the club, starin' absent minded out on Fifth Avenue with a tall glass at his elbow, he ain't half the slacker he looks to the people on top of the green buses.

Not accordin' to Barry. Ten to one he's just developin' a new idea. Maybe it's only a design for a thrift stamp poster, but it might be a scheme for inducin' the Swiss to send their navy down the Rhine. But whatever it is, as soon as Barry gets it halfway thought out, he has to trot around and tell about it.

So when I glance up and see this tall, well tailored party standin' at my elbow, and notice the eager, excited look in his pale blue eyes, I know about what to expect.

"Well, what is it this time, Barry?" says I. "Have you doped out an explosive pretzel, or are you goin' to turn milliner and release some woman for war work?"

"Oh, I say, Torchy!" he protests. "No

chaffing, now. I'm in dead earnest, you know. Of course, being all shot to pieces physically, I can't go to the front, where I'd give my neck to be. Why, with this leaky heart valve of mine I couldn't even——"

"Yes, yes," I broke in. "We've been over all that. Not that I'd mind hearing it again, but just now I'm more or less busy."

"Are you, though?" says Barry. "Isn't that perfectly ripping! Something important, I suppose?"

"Might be if I could pull it off," says I, "but as it stands——"

"That's it!" says Barry. "I was hoping I'd find you starting something new. That's why I came."

"Eh?" says I.

"I'm volunteering—under you," says he. "I'll be anything you say; top sergeant, corporal, or just plain private. Anything so I can help. See! I am yours to command, Lieutenant Torchy," and he does a Boy Scout salute.

"Sorry," says I, "but I don't see how I could use you just now. The fact is, I can't even say what I'm working on."

"Oh, perfectly bully!" says Barry. "You needn't tell me a word, or drop a hint. Just give me my orders, lieutenant, and let me carry on."

Well, instead of shooing him off I'd only got him stickin' tighter'n a wad of gum to a type-

writer's wrist watch, and after trying to do some more heavy thinkin' with him watchin' admirin' from where I'd planted him in a corner, I gives it up.

"All right," says I. "Think you could stand another manicure today?"

Barry glances at his polished nails doubtful but allows he could if it's in the line of duty.

"It is," says I. "I'm goin' to sacrifice some of my red hair on the altar of human freedom. Come along."

So, all unsuspectin' where he was goin', I leads him down into Otto's barber shop. And I must say, as a raid in force, it was more or less of a fizzle. The scissors artist who revises my pink-plus locks is a gray-haired old gink who'd never been nearer Berlin than First Avenue. Two of the other barbers looked like Greeks, and even Otto had clipped the ends of his Prussian lip whisker. Nobody in the place made a noise like a spy, and the only satisfaction I got was in lettin' Barry pay the checks.

"I got to go somewhere and think," says I.

"How about a nice quiet dinner at the club?" says Barry.

"That don't listen so bad," says I.

And it wasn't, either. Barry insists on spreadin' himself with the orderin', and don't even complain about havin' to chase out to the bar to take his drinks, on account of my being in uniform.

"Makes me feel as if I were doing my bit, you know," says he.

"Talk about noble sacrifices!" says I. "Why, you'll be qualifyin' for a D. S. O. if you keep on, Barry."

And along about the *baba au rhum* period I did get my fingers on the tall feathers of an idea. Nothing much, but so long as Barry was anxious to be used, I thought I saw a way.

"Suppose anybody around the club could dig up a screwdriver for you?" I asks.

Inside of two minutes Barry had everybody in sight on the jump, from the bus boy to the steward, and in with the demi tasse came the screwdriver.

"Now what, lieutenant?" demands Barry.

"S-s-s-h!" says I, mysterious. "We got to drill around until midnight."

"Why not at the Follies, then?" suggests Barry.

"Swell thought!" says I.

And for this brand of active service I couldn't have picked a better man than Barry. From our box seats he points out the cute little squab with the big eyes, third from the end, and even gets one of the soloists singin' a patriotic chorus at us. On the strength of which Barry makes two more trips down to the café. Not that he gets primed enough so you'd notice it. Nothing like that. Only he grows more enthu-

siastic over the idea of being useful in the great cause.

“Remember, lieutenant,” says he as we drifts out with the midnight push, “I’m under orders. Eh?”

“Sure thing,” says I. “You’re about to get ’em, too. Did you ever do such a thing as steal a barber’s pole?”

Barry couldn’t remember that he ever had.

“Well,” says I, “that’s what you’re goin’ to do now.”

“Which one?” asks Barry.

“Otto’s,” says I. “From the joint where we were just before dinner.”

“Right, lieutenant,” says Barry, givin’ his salute.

“And listen,” says I. “You’re dead set on havin’ that particular pole. Understand? You want it bad. And after you get it you ain’t goin’ to let anybody get it away from you, no matter what happens, until I give the word. That’s your cue.”

“Trust me, lieutenant,” says Barry, straightenin’ up. “I shall stand by the pole.”

Sounds simple, don’t it? But that’s the way all us great minds work, along lines like that. And the foolisher we look at the start the deeper we’re apt to be divin’ after the plot of the piece. Don’t miss that. What’s a bent hair-pin in the mud to you? While to us—boy, page old Doc Watson.

How many times, for instance, do you suppose you've walked past the Hotel Northumberland? Yet did you ever notice that the barber shop entrance was exactly twenty paces east on Umpteenth Street from the corner of Broadway; that you go down three iron steps to a landin' before you turn for the other 15; or that the barber pole has a gilt top with blue stars in it, and is swung out on a single bracket with two screws on each side? I points out all this to Barry as we strolls down from the theater district.

"By jove!" says Barry. "Wonderful!"

"Ain't it?" says I. "And all done without a change of wig or a jab of the needle. Now your part is easy. You simply drift down the side street, step into the shadow where the cab stand juts out, and when nobody's passin' you work the screws loose. Me, I got to drop into the writin' room and dash something off. Here we are. Go to it."

Course, he could have bugged things. Might have dropped the screwdriver through a grating, or got himself caught in the act. But Barry has surrounded the idea nicely. He couldn't have done better if he'd been sent out to a listenin' post. And when I strolls out again five minutes later there he stands with the pole tucked careful under one arm.

"Fine work!" says I. "But we don't want to hide it altogether. Carry it careless like,

with your overcoat unbuttoned, so both ends will show. That's the cheese!"

It ain't one of these big, vulgar barber poles, you know; not over four feet long and about as many inches thick. But it's a brilliant one, and with Barry in evenin' dress he's bound to be some conspicuous luggin' it. Yet I starts him straight up Broadway, me trailin' 25 or 30 feet behind.

If it had been further up town he might have collected quite a mob of followers, but down here there's only a few passing at that time of night. Most of 'em only turns to look after him and smile. One or two gives him the merry hail and asks where the Class of 1910 is holdin' the banquet.

He'd done nearly five blocks before a flatfoot steps out of a doorway and waves a nightstick at him.

"Hey, whaddye mean, pullin' that hick stuff?" demands the cop.

"Sir!" says Barry, wavin' him off dignified.

Then I mixes in. "It's perfectly all right, officer," says I. "I know him."

"Oh, do you?" says the cop. "Well, some of you army guys know a lot; and then again some of you don't. But you can't get away with any such cut-up motions on my beat."

"But listen," I begins, "I can explain how——"

"Ah, feed it to the sergeant," says he.

"Come along, you," and he takes Barry by the arm.

Being a quiet night in the precinct the desk sergeant had plenty of time to listen. He'd just decided against Barry, too, when I sprung my scrap of paper on him. It's a receipt in full for one barber's pole, signed by Otto Krumpheimer. I knew it was O. K. because I'd signed it myself.

"How about that?" asks the sergeant of the cop.

And all the flatty can do is gaze at it and scratch his head.

"No case," says the sergeant. "Beat it, you."

Then I nudges Barry. He speaks up prompt, too. "I want my little barber pole," says he.

"Ah, take it along," says the sergeant, disgusted.

"Sorry, officer," says I, as we drifts out, and I slips him a five casual.

"Enjoy yourselves, boys," says he. "But pick out another beat."

Which we done. This time we starts from the Northumberland and walks east. Barry had got almost to Madison Avenue before another eagle-eyed copper holds him up. He does it more or less rough, too.

"Drop that, now!" says he.

"Certainly not," says Barry, lyin' enthusiastic. "It's my pole."

"Is it, then?" says the cop. "Maybe you can show the sergeant yet? And maybe I don't know where you pinched it. Walk along, now."

You should have seen the desk sergeant grow purple in the gills when we shows up in front of the rail the second time. "Say, what do you sports think you're doin', anyway?" he demands.

"I'll make a charge of petty larceny and disorderly conduct," says the cop, layin' the evidence on the desk.

"Will you, Myers?" says the sergeant sarcastic. "Didn't ask him if he had a receipt, I suppose? Show it to him, lieutenant."

I grins and hands over the paper.

"Hah!" grunts Myers. "But Otto Krumpheimer don't sign his name like that. Never."

"How do you know?" says I.

"Why," says Myers, scrapin' his foot nervous, "I—I just know, that's all. I've seen his writin', plenty times."

"Hear that, sergeant," says I. "Just jot that down, will you?"

"Night court," says the sergeant.

"Never mind, Barry," says I. "Line of duty. And I'll be on hand by the time your case is called."

"Righto!" says Barry cheerful.

Myers, he was ambitious to lug us both along, but the sergeant couldn't see it that way. So while Barry's bein' walked off to police court,

I jumps into a taxi and heads for McCrea's hotel. If he'd been in bed I meant to rout him out. But he wasn't. I finds him in his room havin' a confab with two other plain clothes gents. He seems surprised to see me so quick.

"Well?" says he. "Giving up so soon?"

"Me?" says I. "Hardly! I've got the crooked cop."

McCrea gives a gasp. "You—you have?" says he.

"Yep!" says I. "But he's got my assistant. Can you pull a badge or anything on the judge at the night court?"

Mr. McCrea thought he could. And he sure worked the charm, for after whisperin' a few words across the bench it's all fixed up. Barry gets the nod that he's free to go.

"May I take my little barber pole?" demands Barry.

"No, no!" speaks up Myers. "Don't let him have it, Judge."

"Silence!" roars the Justice. Then, turnin' to a court officer he says: "Take this policeman to Headquarters for investigation. Yes, Mr. Wales, you may have your pole, but I should advise you to carry it home in a cab."

"Thank you kindly, sir," says Barry. But after he gets outside he asks pleadin': "Don't I get arrested any more?"

I shakes my head. "It's all over for to-night, Barry," says I. "Objective attained,

and if you don't mind I'll take charge of this war loot. Drop you at your club, shall we?"

So I still had the striped pole when we rolled up at McCrea's hotel. I was shiftin' it around in the taxi, wonderin' where I'd better dump it, when I made the big discovery.

"Say," I whispers husky to McCrea, "there's something funny about this."

"The pole?" says he.

"Uh-huh!" says I. "It's hollow. There's a little trap door in one side."

"Hah!" says McCrea. "Bring it up."

And you'd think by the way him and his friends proceeded to hog the thing, that it was their find. After I'd shown 'em where to press the secret spring they crowded around and blocked off my view. All I got was a glimpse of some papers that they dug out of the inside somewhere. And some excited they are as they paws 'em over.

"In the same old code," says McCrea.

But finally he leads me to one side. "Myers is the man, all right," says he.

"Course he is," says I. "If he wasn't why would he be so wise as to whose pole it was, or about Otto's handwritin'?"

"Ah!" says McCrea, noddin' enthusiastic. "So that was your system in having your friend arrested? You tried out the officers. Very clever! But how you came to suspect that the

barber's pole was being used as a mail box I don't understand."

"No," says I, "you wouldn't. That's where the deep stuff comes in."

McCrea takes that with a smile. "Lieutenant," says he, "I shall be pleased to report to Major Wellby that his estimate of you was quite correct. And allow me to say that I believe you have done for the Government a great service tonight; though how you managed it so neatly I'll be hanged if I see. And—er—I think that will be all." With which he urges me polite towards the door.

But it wasn't all. Not quite. I hear there's something on the way to me from the chief himself, and Old Hickory has been chucklin' around for three days. Also I've had a hunch that one boss barber and one New York cop have done the vanishing act. Anyway, when I was down to the Northumberland yesterday for a shave there was no Otto in sight, and the barber pole was still missin'. That's about all the information that's come my way.

Barry Wales don't know even that much. But when he comes in to report for further orders, as he does frequent now, he has his chest out and his chin up.

"I say, lieutenant," he remarks confidential this last trip, "we put something over, didn't we?"

"I expect we did," says I.

“But what was it all about, eh?” he whispers.

“Why,” says I, “you got pinched twice without losin’ your amateur standin’, and one of the stripes opened in the middle. When they tell me the rest I’ll pass it on to you.”

“By George! Will you, though?” says Barry, and after executin’ another Boy Scout salute he goes off perfectly satisfied.

CHAPTER IV

A FRAME-UP FOR STUBBY

I EXPECT I shouldn't have been so finicky. I ain't as a rule. My usual play is to press the button and take whoever is sent in from the general office. But the last young lady typist they'd wished on me must have eased in on the job with a diploma from some hair-dressin' establishment. She got real haughty when I pointed out that we was using only one "l" in Albany now, but nothing I could say would keep her from writing Bridgeport as two words.

And such a careless way she had of parking her gum on the corner of my desk and forgettin' to retrieve it. So with four or five more folios to do on a report I was makin' to the Ordnance Department, I puts it up to Mr. Piddie personally to pick the best he can spare.

"Course," says I, "I don't expect to get Old Hickory's star performer, but I thought you might have one of the old guard left; one that didn't learn her spellin' by the touch method, at least."

Piddie sighs. Since so many of his key-pounders has gone to polishin' shell noses, or sailed to do canteen work, he's been having a

poor time keeping up his office force. "Do you know, Torchy," says he, "I haven't one left that I can guarantee; but suppose you try Miss Casey, who has just joined."

She wouldn't have been my choice if I'd been doin' the pickin'. One of these tall, limber young females, Miss Casey is, about as thick as a drink of water, but strong on hair and eyes. She glides in willowy, drapes herself on a chair, pats her home-grown ear-muffs into shape, and unfolds her note book business-like. And inside of two minutes she's doing the Pitman stuff in jazz time, with no call for repeats except when I'd shoot a string of figures at her. I was handin' myself the comfortin' thought, too, that I'd drawn a prize.

We breezes along on the report until near lunch time with never a hitch until I gets to this paragraph where I mentions Camp Mills, and the next thing I know she has stopped short and is snifflin' through her nose.

"Eh?" says I, gawpin' at her. "Have I been feedin' it at you too speedy?"

"N—no," says she, "bub—but that's where Stub is—Camp Mills—and it got to me sudden."

"Oh!" says I. "And Stub is a brother or something?"

"He—he—Well, there!" says she, holdin' out her left hand and displayin' a turquoise set with chip diamonds.

"Sorry," says I, "but I couldn't tell from the service pin, you understand, when some wears 'em for second cousins. And anyway, the name of the camp had to——"

"'Sall right," snuffles Miss Casey. "I had no call spillin' the weeps durin' business hours. I wouldn't of either, only I had another session with his old lady this mornin' and she sort of got me stirred up."

"Mother taking it hard, is she?" I asks.

"You've said sumpin'," admits Miss Casey, unbuttonin' a locket vanity case and repairin' the damage done to her facial frescoin' with a few graceful jabs. "Not but what I ain't strong for Stub Mears myself. He's all right, Stub is, even if he never could qualify in a beauty competition with Jack Pickford or Mr. Doug. Fairbanks. He's good comp'ny and all that, and now he's in the army I expect he'll ditch that ambition of his to be the champion heavy-weight pool player of the West Side.

"But to hear Mrs. Mears talk you'd think he was one of the props of the universe, and that when the new draft got Stub it was a case where Congress ought to stop and draw a long breath. Uh-huh! She's 100 per cent. mother, Mrs. Mears is, and it looks like some of it was catchin' for me to get leaky-eyed just at mention of the camp he's in. Oh, lady, lady! Excuse it, please, sir."

Which I does cheerful enough. And just to

prove I ain't any slave driver I sort of eggs Miss Casey on, from then until the noon hour, to chat away about this war romance of hers. Seems Mr. Mears could have been in Class B, on account of his widowed mother and him being a plumber's helper when he had time to spare from his pool practicin'. Livin' in the same block, they'd been acquainted for quite some time, too.

No, it hadn't been anything serious first off. She'd gone with him to the annual ball of Union 26 for two years in succession and to such like important social events. But there'd been other fellers. Two or three. And one had a perfectly swell job as manager of a United Cigar branch. Stub had been a great one for stickin' around, though, and when he showed up in his uniform—well, that clinched things.

"It wasn't so much the khaki stuff I fell for," confides Miss Casey, gazin' sentimental at a ham sandwich she's just unwrapped, "as it was the i-dear back of it. It's in the blood, you might say, for I had an uncle in the Spanish-American and a grandfather in the Civil War. So when Mr. Mears tells me how, when it comes time for him to go over the top, the one he'll be thinkin' most of will be me—Say, that got to me strong. 'You win, Stubby,' " says I. 'Flash the ring.'

"That's how it was staged, all in one scene. And later when that Jake Horwitz from the

United shop comes around sportin' his installment Liberty bond button, but backin' his fallen arches to keep him exempt, I gives him the cold eye. 'Nix on the coo business, Mister Horwitz,' says I, 'for when I hold out my ear for that it's got to come from a reg'lar man. Get me?' Which is a good deal the same I hands the others.

"But say, between you and I, it's mighty lonesome work. You see, I'd figured how Stub would be blowin' in from camp every now and then, and we'd be doin' the Sunday afternoon parade up and down the block, with all the girls stretchin' their necks after us. You know? Well, he's been at the blessed camp near three months now and not once since that first flyin' trip has he showed up here.

"Which is why I've been droppin' in on his old lady so often, tryin' to dope why he shouldn't be let off, same as the others. Mrs. Mears, she's all primed with the notion that her Edgar has been makin' himself so useful down there that the colonel would get all balled up in his work if he didn't keep Stub right on the job. 'See,' says she, wavin' a picture post card at me, 'he's been appointed on the K. P. squad again.' Honest, she thinks he's something like a Knights of Pythias and goes marchin' around important with a plume in his hat and a gold sword. Mothers are easy, ain't they? You can bet though, that Stub don't try to buffalo little

old me with anything like that. What he writes me, which ain't much, is mostly that his top sergeant's a grouch or that they've been quarantined on account of influenza. So I sends him back the best advice I've got in stock, askin' him why he don't buck up on his drill, keep his equipment clean, and shift that potato peelin' work to some of the new squads.

"Course, I don't spill any of this to Mrs. Mears. Poor soul! She's got troubles enough, right in her joints. Rheumatism. Uh-huh. Most of the time she has to get around in a wheel chair. Ain't that fierce? And she was mighty nervy about sendin' Stubby off. Wouldn't let him say a word about exemption. No, sir! 'Never mind me, Edgar,' says she. 'You kill a lot of Huns. I'll get along somehow.' That's talkin', ain't it? And her livin' with a sister-in-law that has a disposition like a green parrot!

"So I can't find much fault with her when she sort of overdoes the fond mother act. Seems to me they might let him off now and then, even if he does miss a few bugle calls, or forgets some of the rules and regulations. And this bug of hers about wonderin' when and how what he's doin' for his country is goin' to be reco'nized proper—Well, I don't debate that with her at all. For one thing I don't get just exactly what she wants; whether it's for the President to write her a special letter of thanks, or for Mr. Baker to make Stubby a

captain or something right off. Anyway, she don't feel that Edgar's bein' treated right. He ain't even had his name in the papers and only a few of the neighbors seem to know he's a hero. Yep, it's foolish of her, I expect, but I let her unload it all on me without dodgin'. I've even promised to see what can be done about it. I—I'd been thinkin', sir, about askin' you."

"Eh?" says I, "Me? Oh, I couldn't think of a thing."

"But if I could, sir," goes on Miss Casey, "would—would you help out a little? She's an old lady, you know, and all crippled up, and Stubby he's all she's got left and——"

"Why, sure," I breaks in. "I'd do what I could."

I throws it off casual as I'm grabbin' my hat on my way out to lunch. And I supposed that would be all there'd be to it. But I hadn't got more'n half a line on Miss Casey. She's no easy quitter, that young lady. Having let me in on her little affair, she seems to think it's no more'n right I should be kept posted. A day or so later she lugs in a picture of Private Mears, one of the muddy printed post-card effects such as these roadside tripod artists take of the buddy boys around the camps.

"That's him," says she. "Looks kind of swell in the uniform, don't he?"

It was a fact. Stubby not only looks swell—

but swelling. And it's lucky them army buttons are sewed on tight or else a good snappy salute would wreck him from the chin down. He's a sturdy, bulgy party, 'specially about the leg-gins.

"That's right, too," says Miss Casey. "Know what I tell him? If he can fight like he can eat, good-night Kaiser Bill. But at that they've pared fifteen pounds off him since he's been in the service."

"It's a great life," says I.

"Maybe," sighs Miss Casey, "but I wisht they'd let me have a close-up of him before they risk loadin' him on a transport. That's all I got against the Government. You ain't thought of any way it might be worked, have you? "

I had to admit that I hadn't, not addin' I didn't expect to. And I must have been stallin' along that line for a week or more until the forenoon when Vee blows in unexpected durin' a shoppin' trip and announces that I may take her out to luncheon.

"Fine!" says I. "Just as soon as I give two more letters to Miss Casey."

In the middle of the second one though, there's a call for me to go into the private office, and when I comes back from a ten-minute interview with Old Hickory I finds Vee and Miss Casey chattin' away like old friends. Vee is being told all about Stubby and the hard-boiled eggs he has for company officers.

“Three months without a furlough!” says Vee. “Isn’t that a shame, Torch? What is the number of his regiment?”

Miss Casey reels it off, addin’ the company and division.

“Really!” says Vee. “Why, that’s the company Captain Woodhouse commands. You remember him, Torch?”

“Oh, yes! Woodie,” says I. “I’d most forgotten him.”

“I am going to call him up on the long distance right now,” says Vee.

And in spite of all my lay-off signals she does it. Gets the captain, too. Yes, Woodie knows the case and he regrets to report that Private Mears’s record isn’t a good one; three times in the guardhouse and another week of K. P. coming to him. Under these circumstances he don’t quite see how——

“Oh, come, captain!” puts in Vee coaxin’. “Don’t be disagreeable. He’s engaged, you know. Such a nice girl. And then there is his poor old mother who has seen him only once since he was drafted. Please, Woodie!”

I expect it was the “Woodie” that worked the trick. You see, this Woodhouse party used to think he was in the runnin’ with Vee himself, way back when Auntie was doin’ her best to discourage my little campaign, and although he quit and picked another several years ago I don’t suppose he minds bein’ called Woodie by

Vee, even now. Anyway, after consultin' one of his lieutenants he gives her the word that if Private Mears don't pull any more cut-up stuff between now and a week from Wednesday he'll probably have forty-eight hours comin' to him.

And for a minute there I thought both Vee and I were let in for a fond clinch act with Miss Casey. As it is she takes it out in pattin' Vee's hand and callin' her Dearie.

"A week Wednesday, eh?" says Miss Casey. "Say, ain't that grand! And believe muh, I mean to work up some little party for Stubby. It's due him, and the old lady."

"Of course it is," agrees Vee. "And Torchy, you must do all you can to help."

"Very well, major," says I, salutin'.

And from then on I reports to Vee. It's only the next night that I gives her the first bulletin from the front. "What do you know?" says I. "Miss Casey has a hunch that she might organize a block party for the big night. I don't know whether she can swing it or not, but that's her scheme."

"But what on earth is a block party, Torchy?" Vee demands.

"Why," I explains, "it's a small town stunt that's being used in the city these days. Very popular, too. They get all the people in the block to chip in for a celebration—decorations, music, ice cream, all that—and generally they

raise a block service flag. It takes some organizing', though."

"How perfectly splendid!" says Vee. "And that is just where you can be useful."

So that's how I come to spend that next evenin' trottin' up and down this block in the sixties between Ninth and Amsterdam. I must say it didn't look specially promisin' as a place to work up community spirit and that sort of thing. Just a dingy row of old style dumb-bell flats, most of 'em with "Room to Rent" signs hung out and little basement shops tucked in here and there. Maybe you know the kind—the asphalt always littered with paper, garbage cans left out, and swarms of kids playin' tip-cat or dashin' about on roller skates. Cheap and messy. And to judge by the names on the letter boxes you'd say the tenants had been shipped in from every country on the map. Anyway, our noble allies was well represented—with the French and Italians in the lead and the rest made up of Irish, Jews, Poles and I don't know what else. Everything but straight Americans.

Yet when you come to count up the service flags in the front windows you had to admit that Miss Casey's block must have a good many reg'lar citizens in it at that. There was more blue stars in evidence than you'd find on any three brownstone front blocks down on Madison or up in the Seventies. One flag had four, and none of 'em stood for butlers or chauffeurs.

Course, some was only faded cotton, a few nothing but colored paper, but every star stood for a soldier, and I'll bet there wasn't a bomb-proofer in the lot.

Whether you could get these people together on any kind of a celebration or not was another question. We begins with Mike's place, on the corner.

"Sure!" says Mike. "Let's have a party. I'll ante twenty-five. And, say, I got a cousin in the Knights of Columbus who'll give you some tips on how to manage the thing."

The little old Frenchy in the Parisian hand laundry gave us a boost, too. Even J. Streblitz, high-class tailoring for ladies and gents, chipped in a ten and told us about his boy Herman, who'd been made a corporal and was at Château Thierry. Inside of three hours we'd made a sketchy canvas of the whole block, got half a dozen of the men to go on the committee, had over \$100 subscribed, and the thing was under way.

"I just knew you could do it," says Vee, when I tells her about the start that's been made.

"Me!" says I. "Why it was mostly Miss Casey. About all I did was tag along and watch her work up the enthusiasm. She's some breeze, she is. When I left her she was plannin' on two bands and free ice cream for everyone who came."

As a matter of fact, that's about all I had

to do with it, after the first push. Miss Casey must have had a busy week, but she don't lay down once on her reg'lar work nor beg for any time off. All she asks is if Vee and me couldn't be persuaded to be on hand Wednesday night as guests of honor.

"We wouldn't miss it for anything," says I.

Well, we didn't. I'd heard more or less about these block parties, but I'd never been to one. Course, I wasn't sure just how Vee would take it gettin' mixed up in a mob like that, but I was bankin' on her being a good sport. Besides, she was wild to go and see how Miss Casey had made out.

And say, when we swings in off Ninth Avenue and I gets my first glimpse of what had been done to that scrubby, messy lookin' block, it got a gasp out of me. First off there was strings of Japanese lanterns with electric lights in 'em stretched across the street from the front of every flat buildin' to the one opposite. Also every doorway and window was draped and decorated with bunting. Then there was all kinds of flags, from little ten centers to big twenty footers swung across the street. There was a whackin' big Irish flag loaned by the A. O. H.; two Italian flags almost as big; I don't know how many French tri-colors and some I couldn't place; Czecho-Slovaks maybe. And besides the lanterns and extra arc-lights there was red fire burnin' liberal. Then at either end

of the block was a truck backed up with a band in it and they was tearin' away at all kinds of tunes from the "Marseillaise" to "K-k-k-katie," while bumpin' and bobbin' about on the asphalt were hundreds of couples doing jazz steps and gettin' pelted with confetti.

"Why, it's almost like the Mardi Gras!" says Vee.

"Looks festive, all right," says I. "And I should say Miss Casey has put over the real thing. I wonder if we can find her in this mob."

Seemed like a hopeless search, but finally, down in the middle of the block, I spots an old lady in a wheel chair, and I has a hunch it might be Mrs. Mears. Sure enough, it is. Not much to look at, she ain't; sort of humped over, with a shawl 'round her shoulders. But say, when you got a glimpse of the way her old eyes was lighted up, and saw the smile flickerin' around her lips, you knew that nobody in that whole crowd was any happier than she was just at that minute.

"Oh, yes," says she. "Minnie Casey is looking for you two young folks. She's dancing with Edgar now, but they'll be back soon. Haven't seen my son Edgar, have you? Well, you must. He—he's a soldier, you know."

"We should be delighted," says Vee. And then she whispers to me: "Hasn't she a nice face, though?"

We hadn't waited long before I sees a tall,

willowy young thing wearin' one of them zippy French tams come bearin' down on us wavin' energetic and towin' along a red-faced young doughboy who looks like he'd been stuffed into his uniform by a sausage machine. It's Minnie and Stub.

"Hello, folks!" she sings out. "Say, I was just wonderin' if you was goin' to renig on me. Fine work! An' I want you to meet one of the most prominent privates in the division, Mr. Mears. Come on, Stubby, pull that overseas salute of yours. Ain't he a bear-cat, though? And how about the show? Ain't it some party?"

"Why, it's simply wonderful," says Vee. "I had no idea, Miss Casey, that you were planning anything like this."

"I didn't," says Minnie. "Only after we got started it kept gettin' bigger and bigger until there wa'n't a soul on the block but what came in on it. Know what one of the decorators told me? He says there ain't a block on the West Side has had anything up to this, from Houston Street up to the Harlem. That's goin' some, ain't it? You got here just in time for the big doin's, too. It's comin' off right now. See who's standin' up in the truck over there? That's one of the Paulist Fathers, who's goin' to make the speech and bless the flag. There it comes, out of that third-story window. Wow! Hear 'em cheer."

And as the red-bordered banner with the white field is pulled out where the searchlight strikes it we can make out the figures formed by blue stars.

"What!" says I. "Not 217 from this one block?"

"Uh-huh!" says Minnie. "And every one of 'em a Fritzie chaser. 'Most a whole company. But ther'd been one less if it hadn't been for Stubby, and everybody knows there's luck in odd numbers. That's why we're so chesty about him. Eh, Mrs. Mears?"

Yes, it was some lively affair. After the speech Mme. Toscarelli, draped in red, white and blue, sang the Star-Spangled Banner in spite of strong opposition from one of the bands that got the wrong cue and played "Indianola" all through the piece. And a fat boy rolled out of a second-story window in the Princess flats, but caromed off on an awnin' and wasn't hurt. Also a few young hicks started some rough stuff when the ice-cream freezers were opened, but a squad of Junior Naval League boys soon put a crimp in that. And when we had to leave, along about nine-thirty, it was as gay a scene as was ever staged on any West Side block, bar none. I remarked something of the sort to Mrs. Mears

"Yes," says she, her eyes sort of dimmin' up. "And to think that all this should be done for my Edgar!"

At which Minnie Casey tips us the private

wink. "Why not, I'd like to know?" says she. "Just look who he is."

"Yes, of course, dear," says Mrs. Mears, smilin' satisfied.

"Can you beat that for the genuine mother stuff?" whispers Minnie, givin' us a partin' grin.

"I do hope," says Vee, as we settles ourselves in a Long Island train for the ride home, "that Miss Casey gets her Edgar back safe and sound."

"If she don't," says I, "she's liable to go over and tear what's left of Germany off the map. Anyway, they'd better not get her started."

CHAPTER V

THE VAMP IN THE WINDOW

IT was a case of Vee's being in town on a shoppin' orgie and my being invited to hunt her up about lunch time.

"Let's see," she 'phoned, "suppose you meet me about 12:30 at the Maison Noir. You know, West Fifty-sixth. And if I'm having a dress fitted on the second floor just wait downstairs for me, will you, Torchy?"

"In among all them young lady models?" says I. "Not a chance. You'll find me hangin' up outside. And don't make it more'n half an hour behind schedule, Vee, for this is one of my busy days."

"Oh, very well," says she careless.

So that's how I came to be backed up in the lee of the doorway at 12:45 when this stranger with the mild blue eyes and the chin dimple eases in with the friendly hail.

"Excuse me," says he, "but haven't we met somewhere before?"

Which is where my fatal gift for rememberin' faces and forgettin' names comes into play. After giving him the quick up and down I had him placed but not tagged.

“Not quite,” says I. “But we lived in the same apartment buildin’ a couple of years back. Third floor west, wasn’t you?”

“That’s it,” says he. “And I believe I heard you’d just been married.”

“Yes, we did have a chatty janitor,” says I. “You were there with your mother, from somewhere out on the Coast. We almost got to the noddin’ point when we met in the elevator, didn’t we?”

“If we did,” says he, “that was the nearest I came to getting acquainted with anyone in New York. It’s the loneliest hole I was ever in. Say——”

And inside of three minutes he’s told me all about it; how he’d brought Mother on from Seattle to have a heart specialist give her a three months’ treatment that hadn’t been any use, and how he’d come East alone this time to tie up a big spruce lumber contract with the airplane department. Also he reminds me that he is Crosby Rhodes and writes the name of the hotel where he’s stopping on his card. It’s almost like a reunion with an old college chum.

“But how do you happen to be sizin’ up a show window like this?” says I, indicatin’ the Maison Noir’s display of classy gowns. “Got somebody back home that you might take a few samples to?”

His big, square-cut face sort of pinks up and his mild blue eyes take on kind of a guilty

look as he glances over his shoulder at the window. "Not a soul," says he. "The fact is, I'm not much of a ladies' man. Been in the woods too much, I suppose. All the same, though, I've always thought that if ever I ran across just the right girl——" Here he scrapes his foot and works up that fussed expression again.

"I see," says I, grinnin'. "You have the plans and specifications all framed up and think you'd know her on sight, eh?"

Crosby nods and smiles sheepish. "It's gone further than that," says he. "I—I've seen her."

"Well, well!" says I. "Where?"

He looks around cautious and then whispers confidential. "In that show window."

"Eh?" says I, gawpin'. "Oh! You mean you got the idea from one of the dummies? Well, that's playin' it safe even if it is a little unique."

Crosby seems to hesitate a minute, as if debatin' whether to let it ride at that or not, and then he goes on:

"Say," he asks, "do—do they ever put live ones in there?"

"Never heard of it's being done," says I. "Why?"

"Because," says he, "there's one in this window right now."

"You don't say?" says I. "Are you sure?"

“Step around front and I’ll point her out,” says he. “Now, right over in that far—Why—why, say! She’s gone!”

“Oh, come!” says I. “You’ve been seein’ things, ain’t you? Or maybe it was only one of the salesladies in rearrangin’ the display.”

“No, no,” says Crosby emphatic. “I tell you I had been watching her for several minutes before I saw you, and she never moved except for a flutter of the eyelids. She was standing back to, facing that mirror, so I could see her face quite plainly. More than that, she could see me. Of course, I wasn’t quite sure, with all those others around. That’s why I spoke to you. I wanted to see what you’d say about her. And now she’s disappeared.”

“Uh-huh!” says I. “Most likely, too, she was hauled head first through that door in the back and if you stick around long enough maybe you’ll see her shoved in again, with a different dress on. Say, Mr. Rhodes, no wonder you’re skirt-shy if you never looked ’em over close enough not to know the dummies from the live ones. Believe me, there’s a lot of difference.”

But the josh don’t seem to get him at all. He’s still gawpin’ puzzled through the plate glass. Finally he goes on: “If this was the first time, I might think you were right. But it isn’t. I—I’ve seen her before; several times, in fact.”

“As bad as that, eh?” says I. “Then if I was you I’d look up a doctor.”

“Now listen,” says he. “I don’t want you to think I’m foolish in the head. I’m giving you this straight. Only you haven’t heard it all yet. You see, I’ve been walking past here nearly every day since I’ve been in town—almost three weeks—and at about this time, between twelve-thirty and one, getting up a luncheon appetite. And about ten days ago I got a glimpse of this face in the mirror. Somehow I was sure it was a face I’d seen before, a face I’d been kind of day dreaming about for a year or more. Yes, I know that may sound kind of batty, but it’s a fact. Out in the big woods you have time for such things. Anyway, when I saw that reflection it seemed very familiar to me. So the next day I stopped and took a good look. She was there. And I was certain she was no dummy. I could see her breathe. She was watching me in the glass, too. It’s been the same every time I’ve been past.”

“Well,” says I, “what then?”

“Why,” says he, “whether it’s someone I’ve known or not, I want to find out who she is and how I can meet her for—for—Well, she’s the girl.”

“Gee!” says I, “you’re a reg’lar Mr. Zipp-Zipp when it comes to romantic notions, ain’t you?” And I looks him over curious. As I’ve always held, though, that’s what you can expect

from these boys with chin dimples. It's the Romeo trade-mark, all right, and Crosby had a deep one. "But see here," I goes on, "suppose it should turn out that you're wrong; that this shop window siren of yours was only one of the kind with a composition head, a figure that they blow up with a bicycle pump, and wooden feet? Where does that leave you?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "I wish you could have seen her," says he.

"What sort of a looker?" I asks. "Blonde or brunette?"

"I don't know," says he. "She has a wonderful complexion—like old ivory. Her hair is wonderful, too, sort of a pale gold. But her eyebrows are quite dark, and her eyes—Ah, they're the kind you couldn't forget—sort of a deep violet, I think; maybe you'd call 'em plum colored."

"Listens too fancy to be true," says I. "But they do get 'em up that way for the trade."

There's no jarrin' Crosby loose from his idea, though, and he's just proposin' that I meet him there at twelve-thirty next day when Vee drifts out and I has to break away. "I'll let you know if I can," says I as I walks off.

Course, Vee wants to know who my friend is and all about it, and when I've sketched out the plot of the piece she's quite thrilled. "How interesting!" says she. "I do hope he finds out it's a real girl. Some of those models are sim-

ply stunning, you know. And there is such a thing as a face haunting you. Oh, by the way! Do you remember the Stribbles?"

"Should I?" I asks.

"The janitor's family in that apartment building where we used to live," explains Vee.

"Stribble?" says I. "Oh, yes, the poddy old party who did all the hard sitting around while his wife did the work. What reminded you of them?"

"I'm sure I don't know," says Vee. "But a month or so ago I saw the name printed in an army list of returned casualty cases—there was a boy, you know, and a girl—and I thought then that we ought to look them up and find out. Then I forgot all about it until just a few moments ago. Let's go there, Torchy, before we go out home tonight?"

I must say I couldn't get very much excited over the Stribbles, but on the chance that Vee would forget again I promised, and let her tow me into one of those cute little tea rooms where we had a perfectly punk lunch at a dollar ten per each. But even after a three hour session among the white goods sales Vee still remembered the Stribbles, so about five o'clock we finds ourselves divin' into a basement that's none too clean and are being received by a tall, skinny female with a tously mop of sandy hair bobbed up on her head.

It seems Ma Stribble was still shovelin' most

of the ashes and scrubbin' the halls as well; while Pa Stribble, fatter than ever and in the same greasy old togs, continues to camp in a rickety arm chair by the front window, with a pail of suds at his right elbow. Yes, the one mentioned in the casualty list was their Jimmy. Only he hadn't come back a trench hero, exactly. He'd collected his blighty ticket without being at the front at all—by gettin' mixed up with a steel girder in some construction work. A mashed foot was the total damage, and he was having a real good time at the base hospital; would be as good as new in a week or so.

"Isn't that fortunate?" says Vee. "And your daughter, where is she?"

"Mame?" says Ma Stribble, scowlin' up quick. "Gawd knows where she is. I don't."

"Why, what do you mean?" asks Vee. "She—she hasn't left home, has she?"

"Oh, she sleeps here," goes on Ma Stribble, "and comes home for some of her meals, but the rest of the time——" Here she hunches her shoulders.

"Huh!" grunts Pa Stribble. "If you could see the way she togs herself out—like some chorus girl. I don't know where she gets all them flossy things and she won't tell. Paint on her face, too. It's bringin' shame on us, I tell her."

Mrs. Stribble sighs heavy. "And we was tryin' to bring her up decent," says she. "I

got her a job, waitin' in a lunch room up on the Circle. But she was too good for that. Oh, my, yes! Chucked it after the first week. And then she began bloomin' out in fine feathers. Won't say where she gets 'em, either. And her always throwin' up to her father about not workin', when he's got the rheumatism so bad he can hardly walk at times! Gettin' to be too much of a lady to live in a basement, she is. Humph!"

It looked like Vee had started something, for the Stribbles were knockin' Mame something fierce, when all of a sudden they quits and we hears the street door open. A minute later and in walks a tall, willowy young party wearin' a near-leopard throw-scarf, one of these snappy French tams, and a neat black suit that fits her like it had been run on hot.

If it hadn't been for the odd shade of hair and the eyes I wouldn't have remembered her at all for the stringy, sloppy dressed flapper I used to see going in and out with the growler or helping with the sweepin'. Mame Stribble had bloomed out, for a fact. Also she'd learned how to use a lip-stick and an eyebrow pencil. I couldn't say whether she'd touched up her complexion or not. If she had it was an artistic job—just a faint rose-leaf tint under the eyes. And I had to admit that the whole effect was some stunnin'. Course, she's more or less surprised to see all the comp'ny, but Vee soon

explains how we've come to hear about Brother Jim and she shakes hands real friendly.

"I suppose you are working somewhere?" suggests Vee.

Mame nods.

"Where?" asks Vee, going to the point, as usual.

Miss Stribble glances accusin' at paw and maw. "Oh, they've been roastin' me, have they?" she demands. "Well, I can't help it. What they want to know is how much I'm gettin' so I'll have to give up more. But it don't work. See! I pay my board—good board, at that—and I'm not goin' to have paw snoopin' around my place tryin' to queer me. Let him get out and rustle for himself."

With that Mame sheds the throw-scarf and tosses her velvet tam on the table.

"I'm so sorry," says Vee. "I didn't mean to interfere at all. And I've no doubt you have a perfectly good situation."

"It's good enough," says Mame, "until I strike something better."

"What a cunning little hat!" says Vee, pickin' up the tam. "Such a lot of style to it, too."

"Think so?" says Mame. "Well, I built it myself."

"Really!" says Vee. "Why, you must be very clever. I wish I could do things like that."

Trust Vee for smoothin' down rumpled

feathers when she wants to. Inside of two minutes she had Mame smilin' grateful and holdin' her hand as she says good-by.

"Poor girl!" says Vee, as we gets to the street. "I don't blame her for being dissatisfied with such a father as that. And it's just awful the way they talk about her. I'm going to see if I can't do something for her at the shop."

"Eh?" says I. "She didn't tell you where she was working."

"She didn't need to," says Vee. "The name was in the hat lining—the Maison Noir."

"Say, you're some grand little sleuth yourself, ain't you?" says I.

"And that explains," Vee goes on, "why I happened to remember the Stribbles today. I must have seen her there. Yes, I'm sure I did—that pale gold hair and the old ivory complexion are too rare to——"

"Why!" I breaks in, "that's the description Crosby Rhodes gave me of this show window charmer of his."

"Was it?" says Vee. "Then perhaps——"

"But what could she have been doing, posin' in the window?" I asks. "That's what gets me."

It got Vee, too. "Anyway," says she, "you must meet that Mr. Rhodes tomorrow and tell him what you've discovered. He's rather a nice chap, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's all right, I guess," says I. "A bit soft above the ears, maybe, but out in the tall timber I expect he passes for a solid citizen. I don't just see how I'm going to help him out much, though."

"I'll tell you," says Vee. "In the morning I will 'phone to Madame Maurice that I want you to see the frock I've picked out, and you can take Mr. Rhodes in with you."

So that's the way we worked it. I calls up Crosby, makes the date, and we meets on the corner at twelve-thirty. He's more or less excited.

"Then you think you know who she is?" he asks.

"If you're a good describer," says I, "there's a chance that I do. But listen: suppose she's kind of out of your class—a girl who's been brought up in a basement, say, with a janitor for a father?"

"What do I care who her father is?" says Crosby. "I was brought up in a lumber camp myself. All I ask is a chance to meet her."

"You sure know what you want," says I. "Come on."

"See!" he whispers as we get to the Maison Noir's show window. "She's there!"

And sure enough, standin' back to, over in the corner facin' the mirror, is this classy figure in the zippy street dress, with Mame Stribble's hair and eyes. She's doin' the dummy act well,

too. I couldn't see either breath or eye flutter.

"Huh!" says I. "It's by me. Let's go in and interview Madame Maurice."

We had to waste four or five minutes while I inspects the dress Vee has bought, and I sure felt foolish standin' there watchin' this young lady model glide back and forth.

"I trust Monsieur approves?" asks Madame Maurice.

"Oh, sure!" says I. "Quite spiffy. But say, I noticed one in the window that sort of took my eye—that street dress, in the corner."

"Street dress?" says the Madame, lookin' puzzled. "Is M'sieur certain?"

"Maybe I'd better point it out."

But by the time I'd towed her to the front door there was nothing of the kind in sight.

"As I thought," says Madame. "A slight mistake."

"Looks so, don't it?" says I, as we trails back in. "But you have a Miss Mamie Stribble working here, haven't you; a young lady with kind of goldy hair, dark eyebrows and a sort of old ivory complexion?"

"Ah!" says the Madame. "Perhaps you mean Marie St. Ribble?"

"That's near enough," says I. "Could I have a few words with her?"

"But yes," says Madame Maurice. "It is her hour for luncheon. I will see." With that she calls up an assistant, shoos me into a back par-

lor and asks me to wait a moment, leavin' Crosby out front with his mouth open.

And two minutes later in breezes the Madame leadin' Mame Stribble by the arm. The lady boss seems somewhat peeved, too. "Tell me," she demands, "is this the street dress which you observed in the window?"

"That's the very one," says I.

"Hah!" says she. "Then perhaps Marie will explain to me later. For the present, M'sieur, I leave you."

"Sorry if I've put you in bad, Miss Stribble," says I, as the Madame sweeps out.

"Oh, that's all right," says Mame, tossin' her chin. "She'll get over it. And, anyway, I was takin' a chance."

"So I noticed," says I. "What was the big idea, though?"

"Just sizin' up the people who pass by," says Mame. "It's grand sport havin' 'em stretch their necks at you and thinkin' you're just a dummy. I got onto it one day while I was changin' a model. Course, it cuts into my lunch time, and I have to sneak a dress out of stock, but it's kind of fun."

"Specially when you've got one particular young gent coming to watch regular, eh?" I suggests.

That seems to give her sort of a jolt and for a second she stares at me, bitin' her upper lip. "Who do you mean, now?" she asks.

"He has a chin dimple and his name's Crosby Rhodes," says I. "You've put the spell on him for fair, too. He's out front, waiting to meet you."

"Oh, is he?" says Mame, lettin' on not to care. "And yet when he was livin' in one of our apartments he passed me every day without seein' me at all."

"Oh, ho!" says I. "You took notice of him, though, did you?"

Miss Stribble pinks up at that. "Yes, I did," says she. "He struck me as a reg'lar feller, one of the kind you could tie to. And when he'd almost step over me without noticin'—well, I'll admit that sort of hurt. I expect that's why I made up my mind to shake the mop and pail outfit and break in some place where I could pick up a few tricks. After a few stabs I landed here at the Maison. I remember I had on a saggy skirt and a shirt-waist that must have looked like it had been improvised out of a coffee sack. It's a wonder they let me past the door. But they did. For the first six weeks, though, they kept me in the work rooms. Then I got one of the girls to help me evenings on a black taffeta; I saved up enough for two pairs of silk stockin's, blew myself to some pumps with four inch heels, and begun carryin' a vanity box. It worked. Next thing I knew they had me down on the main floor carryin' stock to the models and now and

then displayin' misses' styles to customers. I had a hunch I was gettin' easier to look at, but you never can tell by the way women size you up. All they see is the dress. And in the window there I had a chance to see whether I was registerin' with the men. That's the whole tragic tale."

"Leaving out Crosby Rhodes."

"That's so," admits Mame. "And it was some satisfaction, bringin' him to life."

"You've done more'n that," says I. "He's one of these guys that wants what he wants, and goes after it strong. Just now it seems to be you."

"How inter-estin'!" says Mame. "Tell me, what's his line?"

"Airplane timber," says I. "He's from out on the Coast."

"Oh!" says she. "From one of these little straight-through-on-Main-street burgs, I suppose?"

"Headquarters in Seattle, I understand," says I. "That's hardly on the Tom show circuit."

"Yes, I guess I've heard of the place," says Mame. "But what's his proposition?"

"First off," says I, "Crosby wants to get acquainted. If he has any hymen stuff up his sleeve, I expect you'd better hear that from him personally. The question now is, do you want to meet him?"

"Oh, I dunno," says Mame careless. "I guess I'll take a chance."

"Then forget that vanishing act of yours," says I, "and I'll run him in."

And, honest, as I slips out of the Maison Noir and beats it for my lunch, I felt like I'd done a day's work. What it would come to was by me. They was off my hands, anyway.

That couldn't have been over a week ago. And here only yesterday Crosby comes crashin' into the Corrugated general offices, pounds me enthusiastic on the back, and announces that I'm the best friend he's got in the world.

"Meanin', I expect," says I, "that Miss Stribble and you have been gettin' on?"

"Old man," says Crosby, his mild blue eyes sparklin', "she's a wonderful girl—wonderful! And within a week she's going to be Mrs. Crosby Rhodes. We start for home just as soon as the Maison Noir can turn out her trousseau; which is going to be some outfit, take it from me."

I hope I said something appropriate. If I didn't I expect Crosby was too excited to notice. Also that night I carried home the bulletin to Vee.

"There!" says Vee. "I just knew, the moment I saw her, that she wasn't at all as that horrid old man tried to make us believe."

"No," says I, "Mame's vamping was just practice stuff. A lot of it is like that, I expect."

“But wasn’t it odd,” goes on Vee, “about her meeting the very man she’d liked from the first?”

“Well, not so very,” says I. “With that show window act she had the net spread kind of wide. The only chance Crosby had of escape was by staying out of New York, and nobody does that for very long at a time.”

CHAPTER VI

TURKEYS ON THE SIDE

SAY, I hope this Mr. Hoover of ours gets through trying to feed the world before another fall. It's a cute little idea all right and ought to get us in strong with a whole lot of people, but if he don't quit I know of one party whose reputation as a gentleman farmer is going to be wrecked beyond repair. And that's me.

I don't know whether it was Vee's auntie that started me out reckless on this food producin' career, or old Leon Battou, or Mr. G. Basil Pyne. Maybe they all helped, in their own peculiar way. Auntie's method, of course, is by throwin' out the scornful sniff. It was while she was payin' us a month's visit one week way last summer, out at our four-acre estate on Long Island, that she pulls this sarcastic stuff. Havin' inspected the baby critical without findin' anything special to kick about, she suggests that she'd like to look over the grounds.

"Oh, yes, Torchy," chimes in Vee, "do show Auntie your garden."

Maybe you don't get that "your garden."

It's only Vee's way of playin' me as a useful and industrious citizen. Course, I did buy the seeds and all the shiny hoes and rakes and things, and I studied up the catalogues until I could tell the carrots from the cucumbers; but I must admit that beyond givin' the different beds the once-over every now and then, and pullin' up a few tomato plants that I thought was weeds, I didn't do much more than underwrite the enterprise.

As a matter of fact, it was mostly Leon Battou, the old Frenchy who does our cookin', that really ran the garden. Say, that old boy would have something green growin' if he lived in the subway and had to bring down his real estate in paper bags. It was partly on his account, you know, that we left our studio apartment and moved out in the forty-five minutes commutin' zone. Then, too, there was Joe Cirolo, who comes in by the day to cut the grass and keep the flower beds slicked up, and do the heavy spadin'. And with Vee keepin' books on what was spent and what we got you can guess I wasn't overworked. Also it's a cinch that garden plot just had to hump itself and make good.

Auntie ain't wise to all this, though. So she raises her eyebrows and remarks: "A garden? Really! I should like to see it. A few radishes and spindly lettuce, I suppose?"

"Say, come have a look!" says I.

And when I'd pointed out the half acre of potatoes, and the long rows of corn and string beans and peas—and I hope I called 'em all by their right names—I sure had the old girl hedgin' some. But trust her!

"With so much land, though," she goes on, "it seems to me you ought to be raising your eggs and chickens as well."

"Oh, we've planned for all that," says I, "ducks and hens and geese and turkeys; maybe pheasants and quail."

"Quail!" says Auntie. "Why, I didn't know one could raise quail. I thought they——"

"When I get started raisin' things," says I, "I'm apt to go the limit."

"I shall be interested to see what success you have," says she.

"Sure!" says I. "Drop around again—next fall."

You wouldn't have thought she'd been disagreeable enough to go and rehearse all this innocent little bluff of mine to Vee, would you? But she does, it seems. And of course Vee has to back me up.

"But, Torchy!" she protests, after Auntie's gone. "How could you tell her such whoppers?"

"Easiest thing I do," says I. "But who knows what we'll do next in the nourishment producin' line? Hasn't old Leon been beggin'

to go into the duck and chicken business for months? With eggs near a dollar a dozen maybe it would be a good scheme. And if we go in for poultry, why not have all kinds, turkeys as well?"

So a few days later I put it up to him. Leon shakes his head. "The chickens and the ducks, yes; but the turkey——" Here he shrugs his shoulders desperate. "*Je ne connais pas.*"

"You jennie what?" says I. "Ah, come, Leon, don't be a quitter."

He explains that the ways of our national bird are a complete mystery to him. He'd as soon think of tryin' to hatch out ostriches or canaries. So for the time being we pass up the turkeys and splurge heavy on cacklers and quackers. Between him and Joe they fixed up part of the old carriage shed as a poultry bar-backs and with a mile or so of nettin' they fenced off a run down to the little pond. And by the middle of August we had all sorts of music to wake us up for an early breakfast. I nearly laughed a rib loose watchin' them baby ducks waddle around solemn, every one with that cut-up look in his eye. Say, they're born comedians, ducks are. I'll bet if you could translate that quack-quack patter of theirs you'd get lines that would be a reg'lar scream on the big time circuit.

And then along in the fall we begun gettin' acquainted with our new neighbors that had

taken that cute little stucco cottage halfway down to the station from us. The Basil Pynes, a young English couple, we found out they were. Course, Vee started it by callin' and followin' that up by a donation of some of our garden truck. Pretty soon we were swappin' visits reg'lar.

I can't say I was crazy over 'em. She's a little mouse of a woman, big eyed and quiet, but Vee seems to like her. Pyne, he's a tall, slim gink with stooped shoulders and so short sighted that he has to wear extra thick eye-glasses. He'd come over to work for some book publishin' house but it seems he wrote things himself. He'd landed one book and was pluggin' away on another; not a novel, I understands, but something different.

"Huh!" says I to Vee. "No wonder he had to go into the lit'ry game, with that monicker hung on him. Basil Pyne! The worst of it is, he looks it, too."

"Now, Torchy!" protests Vee. "I'm sure you'll find him real interesting when you know him better."

As usual, she's right. Anyway, it turns out that Basil has his good points. For one thing he's the most entertaining listener I ever talked to. Maybe you know the kind. Never has anything to say about himself but whatever you start, that's what he wants to know about. And from the friendly look in the mild gray eyes

behind the thick panes, and the earnest way he has of stretchin' his ear you'd think that what you was tellin' him was the very thing he'd been livin' all these years to hear. Then he has that trick of throwin' in "My word!" and "Just fancy that!" sort of admirin' and enthusiastic, until you almost believe that you're a lot cleverer and smarter than you'd suspected.

So when I gets on the subject of how we ducked payin' war prices for vegetables to the local profiteers by raisin' our own he wants to know all about it. With the help of Vee's set of books and a little promptin' from her I gives him an earful. I even tows him down cellar and points out the various bins and barrels full of stuff we've got stowed away for winter. And next I has to drag him out and exhibit the poultry side line.

"Oh, I say!" exclaims Basil. "Isn't that perfectly rippin'? You have fresh eggs right along?"

"All we can use," says I. "And we're eatin' the he—hens whenever we want 'em. Ducks, too."

"How clever!" says Basil. "But you Americans are always so good at whatever you take up. And you such a hard drivin' business man, too! I don't see how you manage it."

"Oh, it comes easy enough once you get the hang of it," says I. "As a matter of fact, I'm only just startin' in. Next thing I mean to

have is a lot of turkeys. Might as well live high."

"Turkeys!" says Basil. "And I've heard they were so difficult to raise. But I've no doubt you will make a huge success with them."

"Guess I'll just have to show you," says I, waggin' my head.

I was for gettin' some turkey eggs right away and rushin' along a flock so they'd be ready by Christmas, but both Vee and Leon insists that it can't be done. Seems it's too late in the season or something. They want to wait until next spring.

"Not me," says I. "I've promised your Auntie I'd raise turkeys and I gotta deliver the goods. If we can't start 'em from the seed what's the matter with gettin' some sprouts? Ain't anybody got any young turkeys that need bringin' up scientific?"

Well, I set Joe Cirollo to scoutin' around and inside of a week he has connected with half a dozen. They comes in a crate as big as a piano box and we turns 'em loose in the chicken yard. When I paid the bill I was sure Joe had been stuck about two prices, but after I've discovered what they're askin' for turkeys in the city markets I has to take it back.

"Oh, well," says I, "if we can fatten 'em up maybe we'll come out winners, after all."

"Sure!" says Joe. "We maka dem biga fat."

After I'd bought a few bags of feed though, I quit figurin'. I knew that no matter how they was cooked they'd taste of money. All I was doubtful of now was whether they was the right breed of turkeys.

"What's all that red flannel stuff on their necks?" I asks Joe. "Ain't got sore throats, have they?"

"Heem?" says Joe. "No, no. Dey gooda turk. All time data way."

"All right," says I, "if it's the fashion. I don't eat the neck, anyway."

I couldn't get Leon at all excited over my gobblers, though. All he'll do is shake his head dubious. "They walk with such pride and still they behave so foolish," says he.

"It ain't their manners I'm fond of," says I, "so much as it is their white meat. Even at that, when it comes to foolish notions, they've got nothing on your ducks."

"Mais non," says Leon, meaning nothing sensible, "you do not understand the duck perhaps. Me, I raised them as a boy in Perronne. But the turkey! Pouff! He is what you call silly in the head. One cannot say what they will do next. Anything may happen to such birds."

He makes such a fuss over the way they hog the grain at feedin' time that I have to have a separate run built for 'em. You'd almost think he was jealous. But Joe, on the other hand,

treats 'em like pets. I don't know how many times a day he feeds 'em, and he's always luggin' one up to me to show how heavy they're gettin'. I was waitin' until they got into top notch condition before springin' 'em on Basil Pyne. I meant to get a gasp out of him when I did.

Finally I set a day for the private view and asked the Pynes to come over special. Basil, he's all prepared to be thrilled as I tows him out. "But you don't mean to say this is your first venture at turkey raising?" he demands.

"Ab-so-lutely," says I.

"Strordinary!" says Basil.

At the end of the turkey run though I finds Joe starin' through the wire with a panicky look on his face. "Well, Joe," says I, "any-thing wrong with the flock?"

"I dunno," says he. "Maybe da go bug-house, maybe da got jag on. See!"

Blamed if it don't look like he'd made two close guesses. Honest, every one of them gobblers was staggerin' 'round, bumpin' against each other and runnin' into the fence, with their tails spread and their long necks wavin' absurd. A 3 a. m. bunch of New Year's Eve booze punishers couldn't have given a more scandalous exhibition.

"My word!" says Basil.

Course, it's up to me to produce an explanation. Which I does prompt. "Oh, that's noth-

ing!” says I. “They’re just tryin’ the duck waddle, imitatin’ their neighbors in the next run. Turkeys always do that sooner or later if you have ducks near ’em. They keep at it until they’re dizzy.”

“Really, now?” says Basil. “I never heard that before.”

“Not many people have,” says I. “But they’ll get over it in an hour or so. Look in tomorrow and you’ll see.”

Basil says he will. And after he’s gone I opens the court martial.

“Joe,” I demands, “what you been feedin’ them turks?”

It took five minutes of cross examination before I got him to remember that just before breakfast he’d sneaked out and swiped a pail of stuff that he thought Leon was savin’ for his ducks. And what do you guess? Well, him and Leon had gone into the home-made wine business last fall, utilizin’ all them grapes we grew out in the back lot, and only the day before they’d gone through the process of rackin’ it from one barrel into another. It was the stuff that was left in the bottom that Joe had swiped for his pets.

“Huh!” says I. “And now you’ve not only disgraced those turkeys for life but you’ve made me hand Mr. Pyne some raw nature-fakin’ stuff that nobody but a fool author would swallow.”

"I mucha sorry," says Joe, hangin' his head.

"All right," says I. "I expect you meant well. But it was a bum hunch. Now see they have plenty of water to drink and by mornin' maybe they'll sober up."

I meant to keep an eye on 'em myself for the rest of the day, but right after luncheon Auntie blows in again, to pay a farewell visit before startin' South, and the turkeys slipped my mind. Not until she asks how I'm gettin' on with my flock of quail did I remember.

"Oh, quail!" says I. "No, I had to ditch that. Couldn't get the right sort of eggs."

Auntie smiles sarcastic. "What a pity!" says she. "But the various kinds of poultry you were going in for? Did you——"

"Did I?" says I. "Say, you just come out and—— Well, Leon, anything you want special?"

"Pardon, m'sieu," says old Leon, scrapin' his foot, "but—but the turkeys."

"Yes, I know," says I. "They're doing that new trot Joe's been teaching 'em."

"But no, m'sieu," says Leon. "They have become deceased—utterly."

"Wha-a-a-at?" says I. "Oh, oh, I guess it ain't as bad as that."

"Pardon," says Leon, "but I discover them steef, les pieds dans le ciel. Thus!" And he illustrates by holdin' both hands above his head.

"Perhaps it would be best to investigate,"

suggests Auntie. "I have no doubt Leon is right. Turkeys require expert care and handling, and when you were so sure of raising them I quite expected something like this."

"Yes, I know you did," says I. "Anyway, let's take a look."

And there they were, all six of 'em, with their feet in the air, and as stiff as if they'd just come from cold storage.

"Like somebody had thrown in a gas attack on 'em," says I. "Good night, turks! You sure did make it unanimous, didn't you?"

I expect my smile was kind of a sickly performance, for the last person I'd have wanted to be in on the obsequies was Auntie. I will say, though, that she don't try to rub it in. No, she tells of similar cases she's known of when she was a girl, about whole flocks bein' poisoned by something they'd found to eat.

"The only thing to do now," says she, "is to save the feathers."

"Eh?" says I, gawpin'.

"The long tail and wing feathers can be used for making fans and trimming hats," says Auntie, "while the smaller ones are excellent for stuffing pillows. They must be picked at once."

"Oh, I'm satisfied to call 'em a total loss," says I.

Auntie wouldn't have it, though. She sends Leon for a big apron and a couple of baskets

and has me round up Joe to help. When I left they were all three busy and the turkey feathers were coming off fast. All there was left for me to do was to go in and break the sad news to Vee.

"As a turkey raiser, I'm a flivver," says I.

"But I can't see that it's your fault at all," says Vee.

"Can't you?" says I. "Ask Auntie."

If the next day hadn't been Sunday, I could have sneaked off to town and dodged the little talk Auntie insists on givin' about the folly of amateurs tacklin' jobs they know nothing about. As it is I has to stick around and take the gaff. Then about ten o'clock Basil Pyne has to show up and reopen the subject.

"Oh, by the way," says he, "how are the turkeys this morning? Are they still practicing that wonderful duck walk you were telling me about?"

Auntie has just fixed an accusin' eye on me, and I was wonderin' if it would be any sin to take Basil out back somewhere and choke him, when in rushes old Leon with a wild look on his face. He's so excited that he's almost speechless and all he can get out is a throaty gurgle.

"For the love of soup, let's have it," says I. "What's gone wrong now?"

"O-o-o la la!" says Leon. "O-o-o la la!"

"That's right, sing it if you can't say it," says I.

“Parbleu! Nom de Dieu! Les dindons!” he gasps.

“Ah, can the ding-dong stuff, Leon,” says I, “and let’s hear the English of it.”

“The—the turkeys!” he pants out.

And that did get a groan out of me. “Once more!” says I. “Say, have a heart! Can’t anybody think of a more cheerful line? Turkeys! Well, shoot it. They’re still dead, I suppose?”

“But no,” says Leon. “They—they have return to life.”

“Oh come, Leon!” says I. “You must have been sampling some of them wine dregs yourself. Do you mean to say——”

“If M’sieu would but go and observe,” puts in Leon. “Me, I have seen them with my eye. Truly they are as in life.”

“Why, after we picked them last night I saw you throw them over the fence,” says I.

“Even so,” says Leon. “But come.”

Well, this time we had a full committee—Vee, Auntie, Basil, Madame Battou, old Leon and myself—and we all trails out to the back lot. And say, once again Leon is right. There they are, all huddled together on the lowest branch of a bent-over apple tree and every last one of ’em as shy of feathers as the back of your hand. It’s the most indecent poultry exhibit I ever saw.

"My word!" says Basil, starin' through his thick glasses.

"That don't half express it, Basil," says I.

"But—but what happened to them?" he insists.

"I hate to admit it," says I, "but they had a party yesterday. Uh-huh. Wine dregs. And they got soused to the limit—paralyzed. Then, on the advice of a turkey expert"—here I glances at Auntie—"we decided that they were dead, and we picked 'em to conserve their feathers. Swell idea, eh? Just a little mistake about their being utterly deceased, as Leon put it. They were down, but not out. Look at the poor things now, though."

And then Vee has to snicker. "Aren't they just too absurd!" says she. "See them shiver."

"I should think they'd be blushin'," says I. "What's the next move?" I asks Auntie. "Do I put in steam heat for 'em?"

It takes Auntie a few minutes to recover, but when she does she's right there with the bright little scheme. "We must make jackets for them," says she.

"Eh?" says I.

"Certainly," she goes on. "They'll freeze if we don't. And it's perfectly practical. Of course, I've never seen it done, but I'm sure they'll get along just as well if their feathers were replaced by something that will keep them warm."

“Couldn’t get the Red Cross ladies to knit sweaters for ’em, could we?” I suggests.

Auntie pays no attention to this, but asks Vee if she hasn’t some old flannel shirts, or something of the kind.

Well, while they’re plannin’ out the new winter styles of turkey costumes, Joe and Leon rigs up a wood stove in their coop, shoos the flock in, and proceeds to warm ’em up. They took turns that night keeping the fire going, I understand.

And when I comes home Monday afternoon from the office I ain’t even allowed to say howdy to the youngster until I’ve been dragged out and introduced triumphant to the only flock of custom-tailored turkeys in the country. Auntie and Vee and Madame Battou sure had done a neat job of costum’in’, considerin’ the fact that they’d had no paper patterns to go by. But somehow they’d doped out a one-piece union suit cut high in the neck with sort of a knickerbocker effect to the lower end. Mostly they seemed to have used an old near-silk quilted bathrobe of mine, but I also recognized a khaki army shirt that I had no notion of throwin’ in the discard yet awhile. And if you’ll believe it them gobblers was struttin’ around as chesty as if they hadn’t lost a feather.

“Aren’t they just too cute for anything?” demands Vee.

“Worse than that,” says I, “they look almost

as human as so many floor-walkers. I hope they ain't going to be hard on clothes, for my wardrobe wouldn't stand many such raids."

"Oh, don't worry about that," says Vee. "We shall be eating one every week or so."

"Then don't let me know when the executions take place," says I. "As for me, I shouldn't feel like tellin' Joe to kill one without an order from the High Sheriff of the county."

And say, if I'm ever buffaloed into buyin' any more live turkeys, I'm going to demand a written guarantee that they're Prohibitionists.

CHAPTER VII

ERNIE AND HIS BIG NIGHT

I'M kind of glad I was with Ernie when he had his big night. If I hadn't been I never would have believed it of him. Not if he'd produced affidavits. No! It would have been too much of a strain on the imagination.

For somehow it's hard to connect Ernie with anything like that, even when I've seen what I have. You could almost tell that, just by his name—Ernest Sudders. And when I add that he's assistant auditor in the Corrugated offices you ought to have the picture complete. You know what assistant auditors are like.

Ernie ran true to type. And then some. I expect there was one or two other things he might have been; such as manager of a gift shop, or window dresser for the misses' department, or music teacher in a girls' boarding school. But I doubt if he'd ever been such a success as he was at the high desk. Seemed like he was born to be an assistant auditor. He was holding the job when I first came to the Corrugated as sub office boy; he still has it, and I can think of only one party that could pry

him loose from it—the old boy with the long scythe.

For one thing, Ernie gives all his time to being assistant auditor. Not just office hours. I'll bet he's one even in his sleep. He looks the part, dresses the part, thinks the part. He don't work at it, he lives it. Talk about this four dimension stuff. Ernie gets along with two—up the column from the bottom, and both ways from the decimal point.

Not such a bad-lookin' chap, Ernie, only a bit stiff from the waist up. You know, like he had his spine in a cast. Then there's the neck-apple. Ernie fits his into a high white wing collar and sets it off with a black ascot tie and a pearl stickpin. Also he sports the only black cutaway that's worn reg'lar into the General Offices. Oh, yes, Ernie could go on at a minute's notice as best man or pall-bearer. I don't mean he's often called on to be either. He only wears that costume because that's his idea of how an assistant auditor should be arrayed.

One of these super-system birds, Ernie is. He could turn out an annual report every Saturday if the directors asked for it. Never has to hunt for a bunch of stray figures. He has everything cross-indexed neat and accurate. He's that way about everything, always a spare umbrella and an extra pair of rubbers in his locker, and he carries a pearl-handle penknife in a chamois case.

But in spite of all that I'm sorry to state that around the Corrugated Ernie is rated as a walking joke. We all josh him, even up to Old Hickory Ellins. The only ones he ever seems to mind much though are the lady typists. The hardest thing he does during the day is when he has to walk past that battery of near-vamps, for they never fail to lay down a rolling eye barrage that gets him pink in the ears.

Course, having noticed that, I generally use it as my cue for passing pleasant words to Ernie. "Honest now," I'll ask him, "which one of them Lizzie Mauds are you playin' as favorite these days, Ernie?"

And Ernie, he'll color up like a fire hydrant and protest: "Now, say, Torchy! You know very well I've never spoken to one of them."

"Yes, you tell it well," I'll say, "but I'm onto you, old sport."

I don't know how long I've been shooting stuff like that at Ernie, and it always gets him going. I have a hunch, though, that he kind of likes it. These skirt-shy boys usually do. And as a matter of fact I expect the only female he ever looked square in the eye is that old maid sister of his that he lives with somewhere over in Jersey.

So this night when we were doing over-time together at the office and it was a case of going out for dinner I'd planned to slip a little something on Ernie by towin' him to a joint where

the lights were bright and they were apt to have silver buckets on the floor. I was hoping he might see some perfect lady light up a cigarette, or maybe give him a cut-up glance over the top of her fizz goblet. It would be cheerin' to watch Ernie tryin' to let on he didn't notice.

He'd already called Sister on the long distance telephone and told her not to wait up for him, explainin' just what it was we was workin' on and how we might not be through until quite late. And Sister had advised him to be sure to wear his silk muffler and not to sleep past his station if he had to take the 11:48 out.

"Gosh, Ernie!" says I. "If you're that way now what'll you be when you're married?"

"But I hadn't thought of getting married," says he. "Really!"

"Yes," says I, "and you silent, thoughtless boys are the very ones who jump into matrimony unexpected. Some evenin' you'll meet just the right babidoll and the next thing we know you'll be sendin' us at home cards. You act innocent enough in public, but I'll bet you're a bear when it comes to workin' up to a quick clinch behind the palms."

Ernie almost gasps with horror at the thought.

"Oh, I wouldn't put it past you," says I. "I expect, though, you'd like to have me class you among the great unkissed?"

"As a matter of fact," says Ernie solemn,

"I have never—Well, not since I was a mere boy, at least. It—it's just happened so."

"And you past thirty!" says I. "What a long spell to be out of luck!"

So I suggests that we work through until about 7:45 and then hit the Regal roof for a \$2 feed and a view of some of this fancy skatin' they're pullin' off there. But that ain't Ernie's plan at all. He has his mouth all set for an oyster stew and a plate of crullers down in the Arcade beanerie.

"Ah, forget your old automatic habits for once," says I. "This dinner is on the house, you know, so why not make it a reg'lar one? Come along."

And for a wonder I persuades him to do it. I expect this idea of chargin' it on the expense account hadn't occurred to him.

Anyway, that's how it come we were piking through West Forty-fifth Street with the first of the theater crowds, Ernie still protestin' that he really didn't care for this sort of thing—cabaret stunts and all that—and me kiddin' him along as usual, sayin' I'll bet the head waiter would call him by his first name, when the net is cast sudden over Ernie's head.

I don't know which one of us saw her first. All I'm sure of is that we both sort of slowed up and did the gawp act. You could hardly blame us, for here in a taxi by the curb is—Well, it would take Robert Chambers a page

and a half at twenty cents a word to do her full justice, so I'll just say she was a lovely lady.

No, I ain't gettin' her mixed with any of Mr. Ziegfeld's stars, nor she ain't any broker's bride plucked from the switch-board. She's the real thing in the lady line, though how I knew it's hard to tell. Also she's a home-grown siren that works without the aid of a lip-stick, permanent wave, or an eyebrow pencil. Anyway, here she is leaning through the taxi door and shoot-in' over the alluring smile.

I couldn't quite believe it was meant for either of us until I'd scouted around to see if there wasn't someone else in line. No, there wasn't. And as Ernie is nearest, course I knows it's for him.

"Ah, ha!" says I. "Who's your friend with the golden tresses?"

That's what they were, all right. You don't see hair like that every day, and it ain't the shade which can be produced at a beauty parlor. It's the 18-karat kind, done up sort of loose and careless, but all the more dangerous for that. And with that snowy white complexion, except for the pink flush on the cheeks, and the big, starry blue eyes, she sure is a stunner.

"Do—do you think she means me?" whispers Ernie husky, as we stop in our tracks.

"Ah come!" says I. "This is no time to stall. If she hadn't spotted you direct you might have let on you didn't see her, and

strolled back after you'd given me the slip. As it is, Ernie, I've got the goods on you for once and you might as well——"

"But I—I don't know her at all," insists Ernie.

Just then, though, she reaches out a pair of bare arms and remarks real folksy: "At last you've come, haven't you?"

"Seems to be fairly well acquainted with you, though, Ernie boy," says I.

As for Ernie, he just stands there starin' bug-eyed and gaspy, as if he didn't know what to do. Course, I couldn't tell why. I knew he always had acted like a poor prune when he was kidded by the flossy key pounders in the office, but almost any nut could see this was an entirely different case. Here was a regular person, all dolled up in a classy evening gown, with a fur-trimmed opera cape slippin' off her shoulders. And she was givin' him the straight call.

"But—but there must be some mistake," protests Ernie.

"If there is," says I, "it's up to you to put the lady wise. You can't walk off and leave her with her hands in the air, can you? Ah, don't be a fish! Step up."

With that I gives him a push and Ernie staggers over to the curb.

"It's been so long," I hears the lady murmur, "but I knew you would remember. Come."

What Ernie said then I didn't quite catch, but the next thing I knew he'd been dragged in, the chauffeur had got the signal, and as the taxi started off toward Fifth Avenue I had a glimpse of what looked very much like a fond clinch, with Ernie as the clinchee.

And there I am left with my mouth open. I expect I hung up there fully ten minutes, tryin' to dope out what had happened. Had Ernie just been stallin' me off tryin' to establish an alibi? Or was it a case of poor memory? No, that didn't seem likely. She wasn't the kind of a female party a man could forget easy, if he'd ever really known her. Specially a gink like Ernie who'd had such a limited experience. Nor she wasn't the type that would go out cruisin' in a cab after perfect strangers. Not her. Besides, hadn't she recognized Ernie on sight? Then there was the quick clinch. No discountin' that. Whoever it was it's somebody who don't hesitate to hug Ernie right in public. And yet he sticks to it, right up to the last, that he don't know her. Well, I gave it up.

"Either he's a foxier sport than we've been givin' him credit for," thinks I, "or else the lady has made the mistake of her life. If she has she'll soon find it out and Ernie will be trailin' back on the hunt for me."

But after walkin' up and down the block three times without seeing anything that looked like Ernie I dodges into a chop-house and has a

bite all by my lonesome. Then I wanders back to the general offices and tries to wind up what we'd been workin' on. But I couldn't help wondering about Ernie. Had he just plain buffaloed me, or what? If he had, who was his swell lady friend? And how did she come to be waitin' there in the taxi? By the way she was costumed she might have been on her way to some dinner dance on Fifth Avenue. That was a perfectly spiffy evening dress she had on, what there was of it. And I could remember jewels sparklin' here and there. Course, she was no chicken; somewhere under thirty would have been my guess, but she sure was easy to look at. Such eyes, too! Yes, a little starry maybe, but big and sparkly. No wonder Ernie didn't care to look at any of our lady typists if he had that in the background.

So I wasn't gettin' ahead very fast untanglin' them dockage contracts, and before 11 o'clock I was yawning. I'd just decided to quit and loaf around the station until the theater train was ready when I hears an unsteady step in the outer office and the next minute in blows Ernie.

That is, it's somebody who looks a little as Ernie did three hours before. But his derby is busted in on one side, one end of his wing collar has been carried away and is ridin' up towards his left ear, his coat is all dusty, and his face is flushed up like a new fire truck.

“For the love of soup!” says I, gaspy.
 “Must have been some party?”

Ernie, he braces himself by grippin’ a chair-back and makes a stab at recoverin’ his usual stiff-neck pose. But it’s a flat failure. So he gives up, waves one hand around vague, and indulges in a foolish smile.

“Wha’—wha’ makes you think sho—party?” he demands.

“I got second sight, Ernie,” says I, “and it tells me you’ve been spilled off the wagon.”

“You—you think I—I’ve been drinkin’?” asks Ernie indignant.

“Oh, no,” says I. “I should say you’d been using a funnel.”

“Tha’s—tha’s because you have ‘spischus nashur’,” protests Ernie. “Merely few glasshes. You know—bubblesh in stem.”

“Champagne, eh?” says I. “Then it was a reg’lar party? Ernie, I am surprised at you.”

“You—you ain’t half so shurprised as—as I am myshelf,” says he, chucklin’. “Tha’s what I told Louishe.”

“Oh, you mentioned it to Louise, did you?” says I. “I expect that was the lovely lady who carted you off in the taxi?”

He nods and springs another one of them silly smiles. “Tha’s ri’,” says he. “The lovely Louishe.”

“Tell me, Ernie,” says I, “how long has this been going on?”

And what do you suppose this fathead has the front to spring on me? That this was the first time he'd ever seen her. Uh-huh! He sticks to that tale. Even claims he don't know what the rest of her name is.

"Louishe, tha's all," says he. "Th' lovely Louishe."

"Oh, very well," says I. "We'll let it ride at that. And I expect she picked you out all on account of your compelling beauty? Must have been a sudden case, from the fond clinch I saw you gettin' as the cab started."

Ernie closed his eyes slow, like he was goin' over the scene again, and then remarks: "Thash when I begun to be surprished. Louishe has most affec-shanate nashur."

"So it would seem," says I. "But where did the party take place?"

That little detail appears to have escaped Ernie. He remembered that there were pink candles on the table, and music playing, and a lot of nice people around. Also that the waiter's head was shiny, like an egg. He thought it must have been at some hotel on Fifth Avenue. Yes, they went in through a sidewalk canopy. It was a very nice dinner, too—'specially the pheasant and the parfait in the silver cup. And it was so funny to watch the bubbles keep coming up through the glass stem.

"Yes," says I, "that's one of New York's

favorite winter sports. But who was all this on—Louise?"

"She insists I'm her guesh," says Ernie.

"That made it very nice, then, didn't it?" says I. "But none of this accounts for the dent in your hat and the other rough-house signs. Somebody must have got real messy with you at some stage in the game. Remember anything about that?"

"Oh!" says Ernie, stiffenin' up and tryin' to scowl. "Most—most disagreeable persons. Actually rude."

"Who and where?" I insists.

"Louishe's family," says Ernie. "I—I don't care for her family. No. Sorry, but——"

"Mean to say Louise took you home after dinner?" says I.

Ernie nods. "Wanted me to meet family," says he. "Dear old daddy, darling mother, sho on. 'Charmed,' says I. I was willing to meet anyone then. Right in the mood. 'Certainly,' says I. Feeling friendly. Patted waiter on back, waved to orchestra leader, shook handsh with perfect stranger going out. Went to lovely house, uptown somewhere. Fine ol' butler, fine ol' rugsh in hall, tapeshtries on wall. And then—then——"

Ernie slumps into a chair, pushes the loose collar end away from his chin fretful, and indulges in a deep sigh. I expect he thinks he's told the whole story.

“I take it,” says I, “that you did meet dear old daddy?”

“Washn’t so very old, at thash,” says Ernie. “No. Nor such a dear. Looksh like—like Teddy Roosh’veit. Behavesh like Teddy, too. Im—impeshuous. Very firsh thing he says is, ‘And who the devil are you?’ ‘Guesh?’ I tells him. ‘Give you three guesshes.’ He—he’s no good as guessher, daddy. Grabsh me by the collar. ‘You, you loafer!’ says he. Then the lovely Louishe comes to rescue. ‘Can’t you see, daddy?’ she tells him. ‘It’s Ernie. Found him at lash.’ ‘Ernie who?’ demandsh daddy. ‘I—I forget,’ says Louishe. ‘Bah!’ saysh daddy. ‘Lash time it was Harold, wasn’t it?’ ‘Naughty, naughty!’ saysh I. ‘Mustn’t tell tales. Bad form, daddy. Lesssh all be calm now and—and we’ll tell you about dinner—bubbles in the glass, ’n’everything. Louishe and I. Lovely girl, Louishe. Affecshionate nashur.’ And thash as far as I got. Different nashur, daddy.”

“I gather that he didn’t insist on your staying?” says I.

No, he hadn’t. As near as I could make out dear old daddy took a firm grip on Ernie in two places, and while the fine old butler held the front door open he got more impetuous than ever. As Ernie tells me about it he rubs himself reminiscent and gazes sorrowful at his dented derby.

"Mosh annoying," says he. "Couldn't even shay good night to lovely Louishe."

"Oh, well," says I. "You can make up for that when you pay your dinner call. By the way, where was this home of the lovely Louise?"

Ernie doesn't know. When he'd arrived he was too busy to notice the street and number, and when he came out he was too much annoyed. Also he didn't remember having heard Louise's last name.

"Huh!" says I. "Except for that everything is all clear, eh? It strikes me, Ernie, as if you'd worked up a perfectly good mystery. You've been kidnapped by a lovely lady, had a swell dinner, with plenty of fizz on the side, been introduced to a strong-arm father, and finished on the sidewalk with your lid caved in. And for an assistant auditor who blushes as easy as you do that's what I call kind of a large evening."

Ernie nods. Then he chuckles to himself, sort of satisfied, and remarks mushy: "Lovely girl, Louishe."

"Yes, we've admitted all that," says I. "But who the blazes is she?"

Ernie rumples his hair thoughtful and then shakes his head.

"But during all that time didn't she say anything about herself, or give you any hint?" I goes on.

Ernie can't remember that she did.

"What was all the chat about?" I demands.

"Oh, everything," says Ernie. "She—she said she'd been looking for me long timesh. Knew me by—by my eyesh."

"How touching!" says I. "That must have been during the clinch."

"Yes," says Ernie. "But nexsh time——"

"Say," I breaks in, "if you don't know what her name is, or where she lives, how do you figure on a next time?"

"Thash so," says Ernie. "Too bad."

"Still," says I, "the kiss stringency in your young career has been lifted, hasn't it? And now it's about time I fixed you up and towed you out to a hotel where you can hit the feathers for about ten hours. My hunch is that a pitcher of ice water is going to look mighty good to you in the morning. And maybe by tomorrow noon you can remember more details about Louise than you can seem to dig up now."

You can't always tell about these birds who surprise you that way. I was only an hour late in getting to the office myself next day, but I finds Ernie at his desk looking hardly any the worse for wear, and grinding away as usual. He looks a little sheepish when I ask him if Louise has 'phoned him yet.

"S-s-sh!" says he, glancin' around cautious. "Please!"

"Oh, sure!" says I. "Trust me. I'm no

sieve. But I'm wondering if you'll ever run across her again."

"I—I don't know," says Ernie. "It all seems so vague and queer. I can't recall much of anything except that Louise—— Well, she did show rather a fondness for me, you know; and perhaps, some time or other——"

"Yes," says I, "lightnin' does occasionally strike twice in the same place. But not often, Ernie."

He's a wonder, Ernie is. Seems satisfied to let it go as it stands, without trying to dope anything out. But me, I can't let anybody bat a mystery like that up to me without going through a few Sherlock Holmes motions. So that evening finds me wandering through Forty-fifth Street again at about the same hour. Not that I expected to find the same lovely lady ambushed in a cab. I don't know just what I was looking for.

And then, all of a sudden, I gets my eye on this yellow taxi. It's an odd shade of yellow, something like a pale squash pie; a big, lumbering old bus that had been repainted by some amateur. And I was willing to bet there wasn't another in town just like it. Also it's the one Ernie had stepped into the night before, for there's the same driver wearing the identical square-topped brown derby. Only there's no Louise waiting inside.

They're a shifty bunch, these independents.

Some you can hire for a bank robbing job or little act with gun play in it, and some you can't. This mutt looked like he'd be up to anything. But when I asks him if he remembers the lady in evening dress he had aboard last night he just looks stupid and shakes his head.

"Oh, it's all right," says I. "No come-back to it."

"Mebby so," says he, "but my big line, son, is forgettin' things."

"Would this help your memory any?" says I, slippin' him a couple of dollars.

He grins and stows away the kale. "Aw, you mean the party with the wild eyes, eh?" he asks.

"Uh-huh!" says I. "I was just curious to know where you picked her up."

"That's easy," says he. "She come out of there, third door above. I get most of my fares from there."

"Oh!" says I, steppin' out for a squint. "Looks like a private house."

"It's private, all right," says he, "but it's a home for dippy ones. You know," and he taps his head. "She's a sample. I've had her before. They slip out now and then. Last night she made her get-away through the basement door. I expect she's back by now."

"Yes," says I, "I expect she is."

And I don't need to ask any more. The mys-

tery of the lovely Louise has been cleared up complete.

First off I was going to tell Ernie all about it, but when I saw him sitting there at his high desk, gazin' sort of blank at nothing at all and kind of smilin' reminiscent, I didn't have the heart. Instead, I asks confidential, as usual:

"Any word yet from Louise?"

"Not as yet," says Ernie, "but then——"

"I get you," says I. "And I got to hand it to you, Ernie; you're a cagey old sport, even if you don't look it."

He don't deny. Hadn't I seen him start on his big night? And say, he's gettin' so he can walk past that line of lady typists and give 'em the once over without changin' color in the ears. He's almost skirt broken, Ernie is.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW BABE MISSED HIS STEP

WHAT Babe Cutler was plannin' certainly listened like a swell party—the kind you read about. He was going to round up three other sports like himself, charter a nice comfortable yacht, and spend the winter knockin' about in the West Indies, with a bunch of bananas always hangin' under the deck awning aft and a cabin steward forward mixing planter's punch every time the sun got over the yard arm.

"The lucky stiff!" thinks I, as I heard him runnin' over some of the details to Mr. Robert, who he thinks can maybe be induced to join.

"Oh, come along, Bob!" says he. "We'll stop off for a look at Palm Beach on the way down, hang up a few days at Knight's Key for shark fishing, then run over to Havana for a week of golf, drop around to Santiago and cheer up Billy Pickens out on his blooming sugar plantation, cross over to Jamaica and have some polo with the military bunch up at Newcastle—little things like that. Besides, we can always have a game of deuces wild going evenings and——"

"No use, Babe," breaks in Mr. Robert. "It

can't be done. That sort of thing is all well enough for a foot-loose old bach such as you, but with me it's quite different."

"The little lady at home, eh?" says Babe. "I'll bet she'd be glad to get rid of you for a couple of months."

"Flatterer!" says Mr. Robert. "And I suppose you think I wouldn't be missed from the Corrugated Trust, either?"

"I'll bet a hundred you could hand your job over to Torchy here and the concern would never know the difference," says Babe, winking friendly at me. "Anyway, don't turn me down flat. Take a day or so to think it over."

And with that Mr. Cutler climbs into his mink-lined overcoat, slips me a ten spot confidential as he passes my desk, and goes breezin' out towards Broadway. The ten, I take it, is a retainer for me to boost the yachtin' enterprise. I shows it to Mr. Robert and grins.

"There's only one Babe," says he. "He'd offer a tip to St. Peter, or suggest matching quarters to see whether he was let in or barred out."

"He's what I'd call a perfect sample of the gay and careless sport," says I. "How does it happen that he's escaped the hymeneal noose so long?"

"Because marriage has never been put up to him as a game, a sporting proposition in which you can either win or lose out," says Mr. Rob-

ert. "He thinks it's merely a life sentence that you get for not watching your step. Just as well, perhaps, for Babe isn't what you would call domestic in his tastes. Give him a 'Home, Sweet Home' motto and he'd tack it inside his wardrobe trunk."

I expect that's a more or less accurate description, for Mr. Robert has known him a long time. And yet, you can't help liking Babe. He ain't one of these noisy tin-horns. He dresses as quiet as he talks, and among strangers he'd almost pass for a shy bank clerk having a day off. He's the real thing though when it comes to pleasant ways of spending time and money; from sailing a 90-footer in a cup race, to qualifying in the second flight at Pinehurst. No shark at anything particular, I understand, but good enough to kick in at most any old game you can propose.

Also he's an original I. W. W. Uh-huh. Income Without Work. That was fixed almost before he was born, when his old man horned in on a big mill combine and grabbed off enough preferred stock to fill a packing case. Maybe you think you have no interest in financin' Babe Cutler's career. But you have. Can't duck it. Every time you eat a piece of bread, or a slice of toast or a bit of pie crust you're contributin' to Babe's dividends. And he knows about as much how flour is made as he does about gettin' up in the night to warm a bottle for little Toot-

sums. Which isn't Babe's fault any more than it's yours. As he'd tell you himself, if the case was put up to him, it's all in the shuffle.

He must have had some difficulty organizin' his expedition, for that same afternoon, when I eases myself off the 4:03 at Piping Rock—having quit early, as a private sec-de-luxe should now and then—who should show up at the station but Mr. Cutler in his robin's-egg blue sport phaeton with the white wire wheels.

"I say," he says, "didn't Bob come out, too?"

"No," says I. "I think he and Mrs. Ellins have a dinner party on in town."

"Bother!" says Babe. "I was counting on him for an hour or so of billiards and another go at talking up the cruise. We'll land him yet, eh, Torchy? Hop in and I'll run you out home."

So I climbs aboard, Babe opens the cut-out, and we make a skyrocket start.

"How about swinging around the country club and back through the middle road? No hurry, are you?" he asks.

"Not a bit," says I, glancin' at the speedometer, which was touchin' fifty.

"Nor I," says Babe. "I'm spending my annual week-end with Sister Mabel, you know. Good old scout, Mabel, but I can't say I enjoy visiting there. Runs her house too much for

the children. Only three of 'em, but they're all over the place—climbing on you, mauling you, tripping you up. Nurses around, too. Regular kindergarten effect. And the youngsters are always being bathed, or fed, or put to sleep. So I try to keep out of the way until dinner."

"I see," says I. "You ain't strong for kids?"

"Oh, I don't mind 'em when they're kept in their place," says Babe. "But when they insist on giving you oatmeal kisses, or paw you with sticky fingers—no, thanks. Can't tell Mabel that, though. She seems to think they are all little wonders. And Dick is just as bad—rushes home early every afternoon so he can have half an hour with 'em. Huh!"

"Maybe you'll feel different," says I, "if you ever collect a family of your own."

"Me?" says Babe. "Fat chance!"

I couldn't help agreein' with him. I could see now why he'd shied matrimony so consistent. With sentiments like that he'd looked on Sister Mabel as a horrible example. Besides, followin' sports the way he did, a wife and kids wouldn't fit in at all.

We'd made half the circle and was tearing along the middle road on the back stretch at a Vanderbilt cup gait when all of a sudden Babe jams on the emergency and we skids along until we brings up a few yards beyond where this

young lady is flaggin' us frantic with a pink-lined throw-scarf.

"What the deuce!" asks Babe, starin' back.

"Looks like a help wanted hail," says I.

"She's got a bunch of youngsters with her and—yep, one of 'em is all gory. See!"

"O Lord!" groans Babe. "Well, I suppose I must."

As he backs up the machine I stretches my neck around and takes a look at this wayside group. Three little girls are huddled panicky around this young party who wears a brown velvet tam at such a rakish angle on top of her wavy brown hair. And cuddled up in her left arm she's holdin' a chubby youngster whose face is smeared with blood something startlin'.

"You don't happen to be a doctor, do you?" she demands of Babe.

"Heavens, no!" says he.

"But perhaps you know what to do to stop nose bleeding?" she goes on.

"Why, let's see," says Babe. "Oh, yes! Put a cold door key on the back of his neck."

"Or a piece of brown paper on his tongue," I adds.

The young lady shrugs her shoulders disappointed. "I've tried all that," says she, "and an ice pack, too. But it's no use. I must get him to a doctor right away. There's one about a mile down this road. Couldn't you take us?"

"Sure thing!" says Babe. "Torchy, you can hang on the back, can't you?"

"Oh, I can walk home," says I.

"No, no," says Babe, hasty. "You—you'd best come along."

So I helps load in the young lady and the claret drippin' youngster, drapes myself on the spare tires, and we're off.

"Is it little brother?" asks Babe, glancin' at the kid.

"Mine?" says the young lady. "Of course not. I'm Lucy Snell—one of the teachers at the public school back there at the cross-roads. Some of the children always insist on walking part way home with me, especially little Billy here. Usually he behaves very nicely, but to-day he seems to be out of luck. His nose started leaking fully half an hour ago. He must have leaked quarts and quarts, all over himself and me. You wouldn't think he could have a drop left in him. I was just about crazy when I saw you coming. There's Dr. Baker's house on the right around that next curve. And say, there's some speed to this bus of yours, Mr. —er——"

"Cutler," says Babe. "Here we are. Anything more I can do?"

"Why," says Miss Snell, as I'm unbuttonin' the door for her, "you might stick around a few minutes to see if he wants little Billy taken to the hospital or anything. I'll let you know." And with that she trips in.

“Lively young party, eh?” I remarks to Babe. “Don’t mind askin’ for what she wants.”

“Perfectly all right, too,” says he, “in a case like this. She isn’t one of the helpless kind. Some pep to her, I’ll bet. Lucy, eh? I always did like that name.”

I had to chuckle. “What about the Snell part?” says I. “That one of your favorite names, too?”

“N—n—no,” says Babe. “But she’ll probably change that some of these days. She’s the sort that does, you know.”

“I expect you are right, at that,” I agrees.

Pretty soon out she comes again, calm and smilin’. It’s some smile she has, by the way. Wide and generous and real folksy. And now that the scare has faded out of her eyes they have more or less snap to ’em. They’re the bright brown kind, that match her hair, and the freckles across the bridge of her nose.

“It’s all right,” says she. “Dr. Baker says the ice pack did the trick. And he’ll take Billy home as soon as he’s cleaned him up a bit. Thanks, Mr. Cutler.”

“Oh, I might as well drive you home, too, and finish the job,” says Babe.

“Well, I’m not missing anything like that, I can tell you,” says Miss Snell. “I’m simply soaked with that youngster’s gore. But I live

way back on the other road. My! Billy dripped some on your seat cushions, didn't he?"

"Oh, that will wash out," says Babe careless. "You're fond of youngsters, I suppose?"

"Well, in a way I am," says she. "I'm used to 'em anyway, being one of six myself. That's why I'm out teaching—makes one less for Dad to have to rustle for. He keeps the little plumber's shop down opposite the station. You've seen the sign—T. Snell."

"I've no doubt I have," says Babe. "And you—you like teaching, do you?"

"Why, I can't say I'm dead in love with it," says Miss Snell. "Not this second grade stuff, anyway. It's all I could qualify for, though. This is my second year at it. I don't suppose you ever taught second grade yourself, did you?"

Babe almost gasps, but admits that he never has.

"Then take my advice and don't tackle it," says Miss Snell. "Not that you would, of course, but that's what I tell all the girls who think I have such a soft snap with my Saturdays off and a two months' summer vacation. Believe me, you need it after you've drilled forty youngsters all through a term. D-o-g, dog; c-a-t, cat. Why will the little imps sing it through their noses? It's the same with the two-times table. And they can be so stupid! I don't believe I was meant for a teacher, any-

way, for it all seems so useless to me, making them go through all that, and keeping still for hours and hours, when they want so much to be outdoors playing around. I'd like to be out myself."

"But after school hours," suggests Babe, "you surely have time to go in for sports of some kind."

"What do you mean, sports?" asks Miss Snell.

"Oh, tennis, or horseback riding, or golf," says Babe.

She turns around quick and stares at him. "Are you kidding?" she demands. "Or do you want to get me biting my upper lip? Say, on five hundred a year, with board to pay and clothes to buy, you can't go in very heavy for sports. I did blow myself to a tennis racquet and rubber-soled shoes last summer and my financial standing has been below par ever since. As for spare time, there's no such thing. When I've finished helping Ma do the supper dishes there's always a pile of lesson papers to go over, and reports to make out. And Saturdays I can do my washing and mending, maybe shampoo my hair or make over a hat or something. Can you figure in any chance for golf or horseback riding? I can't, even if club dues were free to schoolma'ams and the board should send around a lot of spotted ponies for our use. Not that I wouldn't like to give those

things a whirl once. I'm just foolish enough to think I could do the sport stuff with the best of 'em."

"I'll bet you could, too," says Babe, enthusiastic. "You—you're just the type."

"Yes," says Miss Snell, "and a fat lot of good that's going to do me. So what's the use talking? In a year or so I suppose I'll be swinging a broom around my own little flat, coaxing a kitchen range to hump itself at 6:30 a. m., and hanging out a Monday wash for two."

"Oh!" says Babe. "Then you've picked out the lucky chap?"

"I don't know whether he's lucky or not," says she. "It isn't really settled, anyway. Pete Snyder has been hanging around for some time, and I expect I'll give in if he keeps it up. He's Dad's helper, you know, and he isn't more'n half as dumb as he looks. Gosh! Here we are. I hope none of the kids see you bringing me home and tell Pete about it. He'd be green in the eye for a week. Good-by, Mr. Cutler, and much obliged."

As she skips out and up the path toward the little ramshackle cottage she turns and flashes one of them wide smiles on Babe and gives him a friendly wave.

"Well," says I. "Pete might do worse."

"I believe you," says Babe, kind of solemn.

Course, I didn't keep any close track of Mr. Cutler for the next few days. There was no

special reason why I should. I supposed he was busy makin' up his quartette for that Southern cruise. So about a week later I'm mildly surprised to hear that he's still stayin' on over at Sister Mabel's. I didn't really suspicion anything until one afternoon, along in the middle of January, when as I steps off the 5:10 I gets a glimpse of Babe's blue racer waitin' at the crossing gates. And snuggled down under the fur robe beside him, with her cheeks pinked up by the crisp air and her brown eyes sparklin', is Miss Lucy Snell.

"Huh!" thinks I. "Still goin' on, eh? Or has Billy's little beak had another leaky spell?"

Couldn't have been many days after that before I comes home to find Vee all excited over some news she'd heard from Mrs. Robert Ellins.

"What do you think, Torchy!" says she. "That bachelor friend of Mr. Robert, a Mr. Cutler, was married last night."

"Eh!" says I. "Babe?"

"Yes," says Vee. "And to a village girl, daughter of T. Snell, the plumber. And his married sister is perfectly wild about it. Isn't it dreadful?"

"Oh, I don't know," says I. "Might turn out all right."

"But—but she's a poor little school-teacher," protests Vee, "and Mr. Cutler is—is——"

“A rich sport,” I puts in, “who’s always had what he wanted. And I expect he thought he wanted Miss Snell. Looks so, don’t it?”

I understand that Sister Mabel threw seven kinds of fits, and that the country club set was all worked up over the affair, specially one of the young ladies that had played in mixed foursomes with Babe and probably had the net out for him. But he didn’t come back to apologize or anything like that. And the next we heard was that the happy pair had started for Florida on their honeymoon.

Well, that seemed to finish the incident. Mr. Robert hunches his shoulders and allows that Babe is old enough to manage his own affairs. Sister Mabel calmed down, and the disappointed young ladies crossed Babe off the last-hope list. Besides, a perfectly good scandal broke out in the bridge playing and dancing set, and Babe Cutler’s rapid little romance was forgotten. Five or six Sundays came and went, with Mondays following regular.

And then here the other afternoon, as I’m camped down next to the car window on my way home, who should tap me on the shoulder but the same old Babe. That is, unless you looked close. For there’s a worried, puzzled look in his wide set eyes and he don’t spring the usual hail.

“Hello!” says I. “Ain’t lost your baggage checks, have you?”

"It's worse than that," says he. "I—I've lost—Lucy."

"Wha-a-t!" says I, gaspy. "You don't mean she—she's——"

"No," says Babe. "She's just quit me and gone home."

"But—but why?" I blurted out.

"Lord knows," groans Babe. "That's what I want to find out."

Honest, it listens like a first class mystery. According to him they'd been staying at one of the swellest joints he could find in the whole state of Florida. Also he'd bought Lucy all the kinds of clothes she would let him buy, from sport suits to evening gowns. She'd taken up a lot of different things, too—golf, riding, swimming, dancing. Seemed to be having a bully time when—bang! She breaks out into a weepy spell and announces that she is going home. Does it, too, all by her lonesome, leaving Babe to trail along by the next train.

"And for the life of me, Torchy," he declares, "I can't imagine why."

"Well, let's try to piece it out," says I. "First off, how have you been spending your honeymoon?"

"Oh, golf mostly," says he. "I was runner up in the big tournament."

"I see," says I. "Thirty-six holes a day, eh?"

He nods.

“And a jack-pot session with the old crowd every evening?” I asks.

“Oh, only now and then,” says he.

“With a few late parties down in the grill?” I goes on.

“Not a party,” says Babe. “State’s dry, you know. No, generally we went into the ball-room evenings and I helped Lucy try out the new steps she was learning.”

“You did!” says I. “Then I give it up.”

“Me too,” says Babe. “But I’m not going to give up Lucy. Say, she’s a regular person, she is. She was making good, too, and having a whale of a time when all of a sudden—Say, Torch, if it was some break I made I want to know it, so I can square myself. She wouldn’t tell me; wouldn’t have a word to say. But listen, perhaps if you asked her——”

“Hey, back up!” says I.

“You know, if it hadn’t been for you I might never have seen her,” he goes on. “You were there when it began, and if there’s to be a finish you might as well be in on that, too. I’ve got to know what it was I did, though. Honest, I can’t remember anything particularly raw. Been chewing over it for two nights. If you could just——”

Well, at the end of ten minutes I agrees to go up to the plumber’s house, and if the new Mrs. Cutler will see me I says I’ll put it up to her.

"But you got to come along and hang around outside while I'm doing it," I insists.

"I'll do anything that either you or Lucy asks," says he. "I'll go the limit."

"That listens fair enough," says I.

So that's how it happens I'm waitin' in the plumber's parlor for Babe Cutler's runaway bride. And say, when she shows up in that zippy sport suit, just in from a long tramp across country, she looks some classy. First off she's inclined to be nervous and jumpy and don't want to talk about Babe at all.

"Oh, he's all right," says she. "I have nothing against him. He—he meant well."

"As bad as that, was he?" says I. "I shall hate to tell him."

"But it wasn't Babe, at all," she insists. "Don't you dare say it was, either. If you must know, it was that awful hotel life. I—I just couldn't stand it."

"Eh?" says I, and I expect I must have been gawpin' some. "Why, I understand you were at one of the swellest——"

"We were," says she. "That was the trouble. And I suppose if I'd known how, I might have had a swell time. But I didn't. I'd had no practice. And say, if you think you can learn to be a regular winter resort person in a few weeks just try it once. I did. I went at it wholesale. All of the things I'd wanted to do and thought I could do, I tackled. It looks

like a lot of fun to see those girls start off with their golf clubs. Seems easy to swing a driver and crack out the little white ball. Take it from me, though, it's nothing of the kind. Why, I spent hours and hours out on the practice tee with a grouchy Scotch professional trying my best to hit it right. And I couldn't. At the end of three weeks I was still a duffer. All I'd accumulated were palm callouses and a backache. Yet I knew just how it should be done. I can repeat it now. One—you take your 'stance. Two—you start the head of the club back in a straight line with the left wrist. Three—you come up on your left toe and bend the right knee. And so on. Yet I'd dub the ball only a few yards.

“Then, when that was over, I'd go in and change for my dancing lessons. More one—two—three stuff. And say, some of these new jazz steps are queer, aren't they? I'd about got three or four all mixed up in my head when I'd have to run and jump into my riding habit and go through a different lot of one—two—three motions. And just as I'd lamed myself in a lot of new places there would come the swimming lesson. I thought I could swim some, too. I learned one summer down at Far Rockaway. But it seems that was old stuff. They aren't doing that now. No, it's the double side stroke, the Australian crawl, and a lot more. One, two, three, four, five, six. Legs

straight, chin down, and roll on the three. And if you dream it's a pleasure to have a big husk of an instructor pump your arms back and forth for an hour, and say sarcastic things to you when you get mixed, with a whole gallery of fat old women and grinning old sports looking on—Well, I'm tellin' you it's fierce. Absolutely. It was the swimming lesson that finished me. Especially the counting. 'Why, Lucy Snell, you poor prune,' says I to myself, 'you're not having a good time. You're back in school, second grade, and the dunce of the class.' That's what I was, too. A flat failure. And when I got to thinking of how Babe would take it when he found out—Well, it got on my nerves so that I simply made a run for home. There! You can tell him all about it, and I suppose he'll never want to see or hear of me again."

"Maybe," says I, "but I have my doubts. Anyway, it won't take long to make a test."

And when I'd left her and strolled out to the gate where Babe is pacin' up and down anxious, he demands at once: "Well, did you find out?"

"Uh-huh," says I.

"Was—was it something I did?" he asks trembly.

"Sure it was," says I. "You let her in for an intensive training act that would make the Paris Island marine school grind look like a

wand drill. You should have had better sense, too. Why, what she was trying to sop up in six weeks most young ladies give as many years to. Near as I can judge she was making a game play of it, too. But of course she couldn't last out. And it's a wonder she didn't wind up at a nerve sanitarium."

"Honest!" says Babe, beamin' on me and grabbin' my hand. "Is—is that all?"

"Ain't that enough?" says I.

"But that's so easy fixed," says he. "Why, I am bored stiff at these resort places myself. I thought, though, that Lucy was having the time of her young life. What a chump I was not to see! Say, we'll take a fresh start. And next time, believe me, she's going to have just what she wants. That is, if I can persuade her to give me another trial."

It seems he did, for later on he tells me he's bought that cute little stucco cottage over near the country club and that him and Lucy are going to settle down like regular people.

"With a nursery and all?" I asks.

"There's no telling," says Babe.

And with that we swaps grins.

CHAPTER IX

HARTLEY AND THE G. O. G.'S

"Oh, I say, Torchy," calls out Mr. Robert, as I'm reachin' for my hat here the other noon, "you don't happen to be going up near the club on your way to luncheon, do you?"

"Not today," says I. "I'm lunchin' with the general staff."

"Oh!" says he, grinnin'. "In that case never mind."

And for fear you shouldn't be wise to this little office joke of ours maybe I'd better explain that who I meant was Hartley Grue, assistant chief of our bond room force.

Just goes to show how hard up we are for comic stuff in the Corrugated Trust these days when we can squeeze a laugh out of such a serious-minded party as Hartley. But you know how it is. I expect some of them green-eyed clerks on the tall stools started callin' him that when the War Department first turned him loose and he reports back to tackle the old job wearin' the custom tailored uniform with the gold bar on his shoulders. And I admit the rest of us might have found something better to do than listen to them Class B-4 patriots

who would have helped save the world for democracy if the war had lasted a couple years more.

Still, that general staff tag for Mr. Grue tickled us a bit. As a matter of fact he did come back—from the Hoboken piers—about as military as they made 'em. And to hear him talk about the Aisne drive and the St. Mihiel campaign and so on you'd think he must have been right at Pershing's elbow durin' the whole muss, instead of at Camp Mills and later on at the docks on a transport detail. But he gets away with it, even among us who have watched all the details of his martial career.

For the big war gave Hartley his chance, and he grabbed it as eager as a park squirrel nabbin' a peanut. He'd been hangin' on here in the bond room for five or six years, edgin' up step by step until he got to be assistant chief, but at that he wasn't much more'n an office drudge. Everybody ordered him around, from Old Hickory down to Mr. Piddie. He was one of the kind that you naturally would, being sort of meek and spineless. He'd been brought up that way, I understand, for his old man was a chronic grouch—thirty years at a railroad ticket office window—and I expect he lugged his ticket sellin' disposition home with him.

Anyway, Hartley had that cheap, hang-dog look, like he was always listenin' for somebody to hand him something rough and would be

disappointed if they didn't. And yet he was quick enough to resent anything if he thought it was safe. You'd see him scowlin' over his books and he carried a constant flush under his eyes, as if he'd been slapped recent across the face, or expected to be. Not what you'd call a happy disposition, Hartley; nor was he just the type you'd pick out to handle a bunch of men.

All he had to start with was a couple of years' trainin' as a private in one of the National Guard regiments. I suppose he knew "guide right" from "left oblique" and how to ground arms without mashin' somebody's pet corn. But I don't think anybody suspected he had any wild military ambitions concealed under that 2x4 dome of his. Yet while most of us was still pattin' Wilson on the back for keepin' us out of war Hartley had already severed diplomatic relations and was wearin' a flag in his buttonhole.

When the first Plattsburg camp was organized Hartley was among the first to get a month's leave of absence and report. He didn't make it, being a little shy on the book stuff, besides lacking ten pounds or more for his height. But that didn't discourage him. He begun taking correspondence courses, eating corn meal mush twice a day, and cutting out the smokes. And after a four weeks' whirl at the second officers' training camp he squeezed

through, coming out as a near lieutenant. Old Hickory Ellins gasped some when Hartley showed up with the bar on his shoulders, but he gave him the husky grip and notified him that his leave was extended for the duration of the war with half pay.

And the next we heard from Hartley he was located at Camp Mills drillin' recruit companies. Two or three times he dropped in to say he expected to be sent over, but each time something or other happened to keep him within a trolley ride of Broadway. Once he was caught in a mumps quarantine just as his division got sailing orders, and again he developed some trouble with one of his knees. Finally Hartley threw out that someone at headquarters was blockin' him from gettin' to the front, and at last he got stuck with this dock detail, which he never got loose from until he was turned out for good. Way up to the end, though, Hartley still talked about getting over to help smash the Huns. I guess he was in earnest about it, too.

Maybe they thought when they had mustered Hartley out that they'd returned another citizen to civilian life. But they hadn't more'n half finished the job. Hartley wouldn't have it that way. He'd stored up a lot of military enthusiasm that he hadn't been able to work off on draftees and departin' heroes. In fact, he was just bustin' with it. You could see that

by the way he walked, even when he wasn't sportin' the old O. D. once more on some excuse or other. He'd come swingin' into the general offices snappy, like he had important messages for the colonel; chin up, his narrow shoulders well back, and eyes front. He'd trained Vincent, the office boy, to give him the zippy salute, and if any of the rest of us had humored him he'd had us pullin' the same stuff. But those of us that had been in the service was glad enough to give the right arm motion a long vacation.

"Nothing doing, Hartley," I'd say to him. "We've canned the Kaiser, ain't we? Let's forget that shut-eye business."

And how he did hate to part with that uniform. Simply couldn't seem to do it all at once, but had to taper off gradual. First off he was only going to sport it two days a week, but whenever he could invent a special occasion, out it came. He even got him a Sam Browne belt, which was contrary to orders, and once I caught him gazin' longin' in a show window at some overseas service chevrons and wound stripes. Course, he wore the allied colors ribbon, which passes with a lot of folks for foreign decorations; but then, a whole heap of limited service guys have put that over.

When it came to provin' that it was us Yanks who really cleaned up the Huns and finished the war, Hartley was right there. That was

his strong suit. He carried maps around, all marked up with the positions of our different divisions, and if he could get you to listen to him long enough he'd make you believe that after we got on the job the French and English merely hung around the back areas with their mouths open and watched us wind things up.

"You see," he'd explain, "it was our superior discipline and our wonderful morale that did it. Look at our marines. Just average material to start with. But what training! Same way with a lot of our infantry regiments. They'd been taught that orders were orders. It had been hammered into 'em. They knew that when they were told to do a thing it just had to be done, and that was all there was to it. We didn't wait until we got over there to win the war. We won it here, on our cantonment drill grounds. And I rather think, if you'll pardon my saying so, that I did my share."

"I'm glad you admit it, Hartley," says I. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

His latest bug though was this Veteran Reserve Army scheme of his. His idea was that instead of scrappin' this big army organization that it had cost so much to build up we ought to save it so it would be ready in case another country—Japan maybe—started anything. He thought every man should keep his uniform and equipment and be put on call. They ought to keep up their training, too.

Might need some revisin' of regiments and so on, but by having the privates report, say once a week, at the nearest place where officers could meet them, it could be done. Course, some of the officers might be too busy to bother with it. Well, they could resign. That would give a chance for promotions. And the gaps in the enlisted ranks could be kept filled from the new classes which universal service would account for.

See Hartley's little plan? He could go on wearin' his shoulder straps and shiny leggins and maybe in time he'd have a gold or silver poison ivy leaf instead of the bar.

It was the details of this scheme that he'd been tryin' to work off on me for weeks, but I'd kept duckin', until finally I'd agreed to let him spill it across the luncheon table.

"It's got to be a swell feed, though, Hartley," I insists as I joins him out at the express elevator.

"Will the Café l'Europe do?" he asks.

"Gee!" says I. "So that's why you're dolled up in the Sunday uniform, eh? Got the belt on too. All right. But I mean to wade right through from hors-d'œuvres to parfait. Hope you've cashed in your delayed pay vouchers."

I notice, too, that Hartley don't hunt out any secluded nook down in the grill, but leads the way to a table right in the middle of the big room on the main floor, where most of the

ladies are. And believe me, paradin' through a mob like that is something he don't shrink from at all. Did I mention that Hartley used to be kind of meek actin'? Well, that was before I heard him talk severe to a Greek waiter.

Also I got a new line on the way Hartley looks at the enlisted man. I'd suggested that a lot of these returned buddies might have had about all the drill stuff they cared for and that this idea of reportin' once a week at some armory possibly wouldn't appeal to 'em.

"They'll have to, that's all," says Hartley. "The new service act will provide for that. Besides, it will do 'em good, keep 'em in line. Anyway, that's what they're for."

"Oh," says I. "Are they? Say, with sentiments like that you must have been about as popular with your company, Hartley, as an ex-grand duke at a Bolshevik picnic."

"What I was after," says he, "was discipline, no popularity. It's what the average young fellow needs most. As for me, I had it clubbed into me from the start. If I didn't mind what I was told at home I got a bat on the ear. Same way here in the Corrugated, you might say. I've always had to take orders or get kicked. That's what I passed on to my men. At least I tried to."

And as Hartley stiffens up and glares across the table at an imaginary line of doughboys I could guess that he succeeded.

It was while I was followin' his gaze that I noticed this bunch of five young heroes at a corner table. Their overseas caps was stacked on a hat tree nearby and one of 'em was wearin' some sort of medal. And from the reckless way they were tacklin' big platters of expensive food, such as broiled live lobster and planked steaks, I judged they'd been mustered out more or less recent.

Just now, though, they seemed a good deal interested in something over our way. First off I didn't know but some of 'em might be old friends of mine, but pretty soon I decides that it's Hartley they're lookin' at. I saw 'em nudgin' each other and stretchin' their necks, and they seems to indulge in a lively debate, which ends in a general haw-haw. I calls Hartley's attention to the bunch.

"There's a squad of buddies that I'll bet ain't yearnin' to hear someone yell 'Shun!' at 'em again," I suggests. "Know any of 'em?"

"It is quite possible," says Hartley, glancin' at 'em casual. "They all look so much alike, you know."

With that he gets back to his Reserve Army scheme and he sure does give me an earful. We'd got as far as the cheese and demi tasse when I noticed one of the soldiers—a big, two-fisted husk—wander past us slow and then drift out. A minute or two later Hartley is being

paged and the boy says there's a 'phone call for him.

"For me?" says Hartley, lookin' puzzled. "Oh, very well."

He hadn't more'n left when the other four strolls over, and one of the lot remarks: "I beg your pardon, but does your friend happen to be Second Lieutenant Grue?"

"That's his name," says I, "only it was no accident he got to be second lieutenant. That just had to be."

They grins friendly at that. "You've described it," says one.

"He was some swell officer, too, I understand," says I.

"Oh, all of that," says another. "He—he's out of the service now, is he?"

"Accordin' to the War Department he is," says I, "but if a little plan of his goes through he'll be back in the game soon." And I sketches out hasty Hartley's idea of keepin' the returned vets on tap.

"Wouldn't that be perfectly lovely now!" says the buddy with the medal, diggin' his elbow enthusiastic into the ribs of the one nearest him. "Wonder if we couldn't persuade him to make it two drill nights a week instead of one. Eh, old Cootie Tamer?"

Course, it develops that these noble young gents, before being sent over to buck the Hindenburg line, had all been in one of the com-

panies Hartley had trained so successful. I wouldn't care to state that they was hep to the fact that if it hadn't been for him they wouldn't have turned out to be such fine soldiers. But they sure did take a lot of interest in discoverin' one of their old officers. That was natural and did them credit.

Yes, they wanted to know all about Hartley; where he worked; what he did, and what were his off hours. It was almost touchin' to see how eager they was for all the details. Havin' been abroad so long, and among foreigners, and in strange places, I expect Hartley looked like home to 'em.

And then again, you know how they say all them boys who went over have come back men, serious and full of solemn, lofty thoughts. You could see it shinin' in their eyes, even if they did let on to be chucklin' at times. So I gives 'em all the dope I could about their dear old second lieutenant and asks 'em to stick around a few minutes so they could meet him.

"We'd love to," says the one the others calls Beans. "Yes, indeed, it would be a great pleasure, but I think we should defer it until the lieutenant can be induced to leave off his uniform. You understand, I'm sure. We—we should feel more at ease."

"Maybe that could be fixed up, too," says I.

"If it only could!" says Beans, rollin' his eyes at the bunch. "But perhaps it would be

better as sort of a surprise. Eh? So you needn't mention us. We—we'll let him know in a day or so."

Well, they kept their word. Couldn't have been more'n a couple of days later when Hartley calls me one side confidential and shows me this note askin' him if he wouldn't be kind enough to meet with a few of his old comrades in arms and help form a permanent organization that would perpetuate the fond ties formed at Camp Mills.

Hartley is beamin' all over his face. "There!" says he. "That's what I call the true American spirit. And, speaking as a military man, I've seen no better example of a morale that lasts through. It's the discipline that does it, too. I suppose they want me to continue as their commanding officer; to carry on, as it were."

"Listens that way, doesn't it?" says I. "But what do the initials at the end stand for—the G. O. G.'s.?"

"Can't you guess?" says Hartley, almost blushin'. "Grue's Overseas Graduates."

"Well, well!" says I. "Say, that's handin' you something, eh? Looked like a fine bunch of young chaps. Some of 'em college hicks, I expect?"

"Oh, yes," says Hartley. "All kinds from plumbers to multi-millionaires. Fact! I had young Ogden Twombly as company secretary

at one time. Yes, and I remember docking his leave twelve hours once for being late at assembly. But see what it's done for those boys."

"And think what they did to the Huns," says I. "But where's this joint they want to meet you at? What's the number again? Why, that's the Plutoria."

"Is it?" says Hartley. "Oh, well, there were a lot of young swells among 'em. I must get them interested in my Veteran Reserve plan. I'll have to make a little speech, I suppose, welcoming them back and all that sort of thing. Perhaps you'd like to come along, Torchy?"

"Sure!" says I. "That is, so long as they don't call on me for any remarks. How about this at the bottom, though? 'Civilian dress, please'?"

"Oh, they'd feel a little easier, I suppose," says Hartley, "if I wasn't in uniform. Maybe it would be best, the first time."

So that's how it happened that promptly at 4 p. m. next day we was shown up to this private suite in the Plutoria. Must have been kind of hard for Hartley to give up his nifty O. D.'s, for he ain't such an impressive young gent in a sack coat. And the braid bound cutaway and striped pants he's dug out for the occasion makes him look more like a floor walker from the white goods department than ever. But he tries to look the second lieutenant in spite of it,

bracin' his shoulders well back and swellin' his chest out important.

It seems the G. O. G.'s has been doin' some recruitin' meantime, for there's a dozen or more grouped about the room, some in citizens' clothes but more still in the soldier togs they wore when they came off the transport. And to judge by the looks of a table I got a squint at behind a screen, they'd been doin' a little preliminary celebratin'. However, they all salutes respectful and Hartley had just started to shoot off his speech, which begins, of course: "Speaking as a military man——" when this Beans gent interrupts.

"Pardon me, lieutenant," says he, "but the members of our organization are quite anxious to know, first of all, if you will accept the high command of the Gogs, so called."

"With pleasure," says Hartley. "And as I was about to say——"

"Just a moment," breaks in Beans again. "Fellow Gogs, we have before us a willing candidate for the High Command. What is your pleasure?"

"Initiation!" they whoops in chorus.

"Carried!" says Beans. "Let the right worthy Buddies proceed to administer the Camp Mills degree."

"Signal!" calls out another cheerful. "Four—seven—eleven! Run the guard!"

Say, I couldn't tell exactly what happened

next, for I was hustled into a corner and those noble young heroes of the Marne and elsewhere, full of lofty aims and high ambitions and—and other things—Well, they certainly didn't need any promptin' to carry out the order of ceremonies. Without a word or a whisper they proceeds to grab Hartley wherever the grabbin' was good and then pass him along. By climbin' on a chair I could get a glimpse of him now and then as he is sent whirlin' and bumpin' about, like a bottle bobbin' around in rough water. Back and forth he goes, sometimes touchin' the floor and then again being tossed toward the ceilin'. Two or three of 'em would get him and start rushin' him across the room when another bunch would tear him loose and begin some maneuvers of their own.

Anyway, runnin' the guard seems to be about as strenuous an act as anybody could go through and come out whole. It lasts until all hands seem to be pretty well out of breath and someone blows a whistle. Then a couple of 'em drags Hartley up in front of Brother Beans and salutes.

"Well, right worthy Buddies," says he, "what have you to report concerning the candidate?"

"Sorry, sir," says one, "but we caught him tryin' to run the guard."

"Ah!" says Beans. "Did he get away with it?"

"He did not," says the Buddie. "We suspect he's a dud, too."

"Very serious," says Beans, shakin' his head. "Candidate, what have you to say for yourself?"

To judge by the hectic tint on Hartley's neck and ears he had a whole heap he wanted to say, but for a minute or so all he can do is breathe hard and glare. He's a good deal of a sight, too. The cutaway coat has lost one of its tails; his hair is rumpled up like feathers, and his collar has parted its front moorin's. As soon as he gets his wind though, he tries to state what's on his mind.

"You—you young rough-necks!" says he. "I—I'll make you sweat for this. You'll see!"

"Harken, fellow Gogs!" says Beans. "The candidate presumes to address your Grand Worthy in terms unbecoming an officer and a gentleman: I would suggest that we suspend the ritual until by some means he can be brought to his better senses. Can anyone think of a way?"

"Sure!" someone sings out. "Let's give him Days Gone By."

The vote seems to be unanimous and the proceedin's open with Brother Beans waggin' his finger under Hartley's nose. "Kindly recall November 22, 1917," says he. "It was Saturday, and my leave ticket read from 11 a. m. of

that date until 11 p. m. of the 23rd. You knew who was waiting for me at the Matron's House, too. And just because I'd changed to leather leggins inside the gate you called me back and put me to scrubbing the barracks floor, making me miss my last chance at a *matinée* and otherwise queering a perfectly good day. Next!"

"My turn!" sings out half a dozen others, but out of the push that surges toward Hartley steps a light-haired, neat dressed young gent, who walks with a slight limp. "I trust you'll remember me, lieutenant," says he. "I was Private Nelson, guilty of the awful crime of appearing at inspection with two grease spots on my tunic because you'd kept me on mess sergeant detail for two weeks and the issues of extra uniforms hadn't been made. So you gave me double guard duty the day my folks came all the way down from Buffalo to see me. Real clever of you, wasn't it?"

One by one they reminded Hartley of little things like that, without givin' him a chance to peep, until each one had had his say. But finally Hartley gets an openin'.

"You got just what you needed—discipline," says he. "That's what made soldiers out of you."

"Oh, did it!" says Brother Beans. "Then perhaps a little of it would qualify you for the High Command. Shall we try it, Most Worthy Buddies?"

“Soak it on him, Beans!” is the verdict, shouted enthusiastic from all sides.

“So let it be,” says Beans solemn. “And now, candidate, you are about to be escorted forth where the elusive cigar-butt lurks in the gutter and scraps of paper litter the pavement. As an exponent of this particular brand of discipline you will see that no small item escapes you. Should you be so remiss, or should you falter in doing your full duty, you will be returned at once to this room, where retribution waits with heavy hands. Ho, Worthy Buddies! Invest the candidate with the sacred insignia of the empty gunny sack.”

And say, when them Gogs started out to put a thing through they did it systematic and thorough. Inside of a minute Hartley is armed with an old bag and is being hustled out to the elevator. As they didn't seem to be taking much notice of me, I tags along, too. They leads Hartley right out in front of the Plutoria and sets him to cleanin' up the block.

Course, it's a little odd to see a young gent in torn cutaway coat and tousled hair scramblin' around under taxi-cabs and dodgin' cars to pick up cigar-butts and chewin' gum papers. So quite a crowd collects. Some of 'em cheers and some haw-haws. But the overseas vets. don't allow Hartley to let up for a second.

“Hey! Don't miss that cigarette stub!” one would call out to him. And as soon as he'd re-

trieved that another would point out a piece of banana peelin' out in the middle of the avenue. He got cussed enthusiastic by some of the taxi drivers who just grazed him, and the traffic cop threatened to run him in until he saw the bunch of soldiers bossin' the job and then he grins and turns the other way.

I expect I should have been more or less wrathful at seein' a brother officer get it as raw as that, but I'm afraid I did more or less grin-nin' at some of Hartley's antics. It struck me, though, that he might be kind of embarrassed if I stayed around until they turned him loose. So before he finished I edged out of the crowd and drifted off.

I couldn't help puttin' one thing up to Brother Beans though. "Excuse me for gettin' curious," says I, "but when I asks Hartley what G. O. G. stands for he made kind of a punk guess. If it ain't any deep secret——"

"It is," says Brother Beans, "but I think I'll let you in on it. The name of our noble organization is 'Grue's Overseas Grouches,' and our humble object is to rebuke the only taint of Prussianism which we have personally encountered in an otherwise perfectly good man's army. When we've done that we intend to disband."

"Huh!" says I, glancin' over to where Hartley is springin' sort of a sheepish smile at a buck private who's pattin' him on the back, "I think you can most call it a job now."

CHAPTER X

THE CASE OF OLD JONESEY

AND then again, you can't always tell. I forget whether it was Bill Shakespeare first sprung that line, or Willie Collier; but whoever it was he said a whole bookful at once. Wise stuff. That's it. And simple, too. Yet it's one of the first things we forget.

But to get the point over I expect I'll have to begin with this bond-room bunch of ours at the Corrugated. They're the kind of young sports who always think they can tell. More'n that they always will, providin' they can get anybody to listen. About any subject you can name, from whether the government should own the railroads to describin' the correct hold in dancin' the shimmy.

This particular day though it happens to be babidolls. Maybe it wasn't just accident, either. I expect the sudden arrival of spring had something to do with the choice of topic. For out in Madison Square park the robins were hop-pin' busy around in the flower beds, couples were twosing confidential on the benches, lady typists were lunchin' off ice cream cones, and

the Greek tray peddlers were sellin' May flowers.

Anyway, it seemed like this was a day when romance was in the air, if you get me. I think Izzy Gunkheimer must have started it with that thrillin' tale of his about how he got rung in on a midnight studio supper down in Greenwich Village and the little movie star who mistook him for Charley Zukor. Izzy would spin that if he got half an openin'. It was his big night. I believe he claims he got hugged or something. And he always ends up by rollin' his eyes, suckin' in his breath and declarin' passionate: "Some queen, yes-s-s!"

But the one who had the floor when I strolls into the bond room just before the end of the noon hour is Skip Martin, who helped win the war by servin' the last two months checkin' supplies for the front at St. Nazaire. He was relatin' an A. W. O. L. adventure in which a little French girl by the name of Mimi figured prominent, when Budge Haley, who was a corporal in the Twenty-seventh and got all the way to Coblenz, crashed in heartless.

"Cheap stuff, them base port fluffs," says Budge. "Always beggin' you for chocolate or nickin' you for francs some way. And as for looks, I couldn't see it. But say, you should have seen what I tumbled into one night up in Belgium. We'd plugged twenty-six kilometers through the mud and rain that day and was bil-

leted swell in the town hall. The mess call had just sounded and I was gettin' in line when the Loot yanks me out to tote his bag off to some lodgin's he'd been assigned five or six blocks away.

"Maybe I wasn't good and sore, too, with everything gettin' cold and me as a refugee. I must have got mixed up in my directions, for I couldn't find any house with a green iron balcony over the front door noway. Finally I takes a chance on workin' some of my French and knocks at a blue door. Took me some time to raise anybody, and when a girl does answer all I gets out of her is a squeal and the door is slammed shut again. I was backin' off disgusted when here comes this dame with the big eyes and the grand duchess airs.

"'Ah le bon Dieu!' says she gaspy. 'Le soldat d'Amerique! Entrez, m'sieur.' And say, even if I couldn't have savvied a word, that smile would have been enough. Did I get the glad hand? Listen; she hadn't seen anything but Huns for nearly four years. Most of that time she'd spent hidin' in the cellar or somewhere, and for her I was the dove of peace. She tried to tell me all about it, and I expect she did, only I couldn't comprenez more'n a quarter of her rapid fire French. But the idea seemed to be that I was a he-angel of the first class who deserved the best there was in the house. Maybe I didn't get it, too. The Huns hadn't

been gone but a few hours and the peace dinner she'd planned was only a sketchy affair, as she wasn't dead sure they wouldn't come back. When she sees me though, she puts a stop order on all that third-rate stuff and tells the cook to go the limit. And say, they must have dug up food reserves from the sub-cellar, for when me and the Countess finally sits down——"

"Ah, don't pull that on us!" protests Skip Martin. "We admit the vintage champagne, and the pâté de foie gras, but that Countess stuff has been overdone."

"Oh, has it?" says Budge. "You mean you didn't see any hangin' 'round the freight sheds. But this is in Bastogne, old son, and there was her Countess mark plastered all over everything, from the napkins to the mantelpiece. Maybe I don't know one when I get a close-up, same as I did then. Huh! I'm telling you she was the real thing. Why, I'll bet she could sail into Tiffany's tomorrow and open an account just on the way she carries her chin."

"Course she was a Countess," says Izzy. "I'll bet it was some dinner, too. And what then?"

"It didn't happen until just as I was leavin'," says Budge. "'Sis,' says I, 'vous etes un-un peach. Merci very much.' And I was holdin' out my hand for a getaway shake when she closes in with a clinch that makes this Romeo and Juliet balcony scene look like an old maid's

farewell. M-m-m-m. Honest, I didn't wash it off for two days. And, countess or not, she was some grand little lady. I'll tell the world that."

"Look!" says one of our noble exempts. "You've even got old Jonesey smackin' his lips."

That gets a big laugh from the bunch. It always does, for he's one of our permanent jokes, old Jones. And as he happens to be sittin' humped over here in the corner brushin' traces of an egg sandwich from his mouth corners, the josh comes in kind of pat.

"Must have been some lady killer in his time, eh?" suggests Skip Martin.

That gets across as a good line too, and Skip follows it up with another. "Let's ask him, fellers."

And the next thing old Jones knows he's surrounded by this grinnin' circle of young hicks while Budge Haley is demandin': "Is it so, Jonesey, that you used to be a reg'lar chicken hound?"

I expect it's the funny way he's gone bald, with only a fringe of grayish hair left, and the watery blue eyes behind the dark glasses, that got us callin' him Old Jones. Maybe the bent shoulders and his being deaf in one ear helps. But as a matter of fact, I don't think he's quite sixty. To judge by the fringe, he once had a crop of sandy hair that was more or less curly. Some of the color still holds in the bristly mus-

tache and the ear tufts. A short, chunky party with a stubby nose and sort of a solid-lookin' chin, he is.

But there never is much satisfaction kiddin' Jonesey. You can't get his goat. He just holds his hand up to his ear and asks kind of bored: "Eh, what's that?"

"How about them swell dames that used to go wild over you?" comes back Skip.

Old Jones gazes up at Skip kind of mild and puzzled. Then he shakes his head slow. "No," says he. "Not me. If—if they did I—I must have forgot."

Which sets the bunch to howlin' at Skip. "There! Maybe that'll hold you, eh?" someone remarks. And as they drift off Jonesey tackles a slice of lunch-room pie placid.

It struck me as rather neat, comin' from the old boy. He must have forgot! I had a chuckle over that all by myself. What could Jonesey have to forget? They tell me he's been with the Corrugated twenty years or more. Why, he must have been on the payroll before some of them young sports was born. And for the last fifteen he's held the same old job—assistant filin' clerk. Some life, eh?

About all we know of Old Jones is that he lives in a little back room down on lower Sixth Avenue with a mangy green parrot nearly as old as he is. They say he baches it there, cookin' his meals on a one-burner oil stove, never re-

portin' sick, never takin' a vacation, and never gettin' above Thirty-third Street or below Fourteenth.

Course, so far as the force is concerned, he's just so much dead wood. Every shake-up we have somebody wants to fire him, or pension him off. But Mr. Ellins won't have it. "No," says he. "Let him stay on." And you bet Jonesey stays. He drills around, fussin' over the files, doing things just the way he did twenty years ago, I suppose, but never gettin' in anybody's way or pullin' any grouch. I've got so I don't notice him any more than as if he was somebody's shadow passin' by. You know, he's just a blank. And if it wasn't for them bond-room humorists cuttin' loose at him once in a while I'd almost forget whether he was still on the staff or not.

It was this same afternoon, along about 2:30, that I gets a call from Old Hickory's private office and finds this picturesque lookin' bird with the three piece white lip whiskers and the premature Panama lid glarin' indignant at the boss.

"Torchy," says Mr. Ellins, glancin' at a card, "this is Señor Don Pedro Cassaba y Tarra-gona."

"Oh, yes!" says I, just as though I wasn't surprised a bit.

"Señor Don Pedro and so on," adds Old Hickory, "is from Havana, and for the last half hour he has been trying to tell me something

very important, I've no doubt, to him. As it happens I am rather busy on some affairs of my own and I—er—Oh, for the love of soup, Torchy take him away somewhere and find out what it's all about."

"Sure!" says I. "This way, Seenor."

"Perdone," says he. "Say-nohr."

"Got you," says I, "only I may not follow you very far. About all the Spanish I had I used up this noon orderin' an omelet, but maybe we can get somewhere if we're both patient. Here we are, in my nice cozy corner with all the rest of the day before us. Have a chair, Say-nohr."

He's a perky, high-colored old boy, and to judge by the restless black eyes, a real live wire. He looks me over sort of doubtful, stroking the zippy little chin tuft as he does it, but he ends by shruggin' his shoulders resigned.

"I come," says he, "in quest of Señor Captain Yohness."

"Yohness?" says I, tryin' to look thoughtful, "No such party around here that I know of."

"It must be," says he. "That I have ascertained."

"Oh, well!" says I. "Suppose we admit that much as a starter. What about him? What's he done?"

"Ah!" says the Señor Don Pedro, spreadin' out his hands eloquent. "But that is a long tale."

It was, too. I expect that was what had got him in wrong with Old Hickory. However, he tackles it once more, using the full-arm movement and sprinklin' in Spanish liberal whenever he got stuck. Course, this fallin' back on his native tongue must have been a relief to him, but it didn't help me out much. Some I could guess at, and when I couldn't I'd get him to repeat it until I worked up a hunch. Then we'd take a fresh start. It's surprisin', too, how well we got along after we had the system doped out.

And accordin' to the Hon. Pete this Cap. Yohness party is an American who hails from New York. Don't sound reasonable, I admit, with a monicker like that, but I let the old boy spin along. Yohness had gone to Cuba years ago, way back before the Spanish-American war. I take it he was part of a filibusterin' outfit that was runnin' in guns and ammunition for the Cubans to use against the Spaniards. In fact, he mentions Dynamite Johnny O'Brien as the leader of the crowd. I think that was the name. Listens like it might have been, anyway.

Well, he says this Señor Yohness is some reckless cut-up himself, for he not only runs the blockade of Spanish warships and lands his stuff, but then has the nerve to stick around the island and even take a little trip into Havana. Seems that was some stunt, too, for if he'd been caught at it he'd have found a swift finish against the nearest wall.

Course, he had to go in disguise, but he was handicapped by havin' red hair. Not so vivid as mine, the Señor assures me, but red enough so he wouldn't be mistaken easy for a Spaniard. He'd have gotten away with the act, too, if he hadn't capped it by takin' the wildest chances anybody could have thought up.

While he's ramblin' around Havana, takin' in all the sights and rubbin' elbows every minute with men who'd ask no better sport than giving him a permanent chest puncture if they'd known who he was, what does he do but get tangled up in a love affair. Even if his head hadn't been specially priced for more pesos than you could put in a sugar barrel, this was a hot time for any American to be lallygaggin' around the ladies in that particular burg. For the Spanish knew all about where the reconcentrados were getting their firearms from and they were good and sore on us. But little details like that don't seem to bother El Capitan Yohness a bit. When he gets in line with an oh boy! smile from behind a window grill he smiles back and comes around for an encore. That's the careless kind of a Yank he is.

What makes it worse, though, is the fact that this special window happens to be in the Governor's Palace. And the lady herself! The Honorable Pedro shudders as he relates it. She is none other than la Señorita Mario, a niece of the Governor General.

She must have had misbehavin' eyes and a kittenish disposition, for she seems to fall for this disguised New Yorker at first sight. Most likely it was on account of his red hair. Anyway, after one or two long distance exchanges she drops out a note arranging a twosome in the palace gardens by moonlight. It's a way they have, I understand. And this Yohness guy, he don't do a thing but keep the date. Course, he must have known that as a war risk he'd have been quoted as payin' about a thousand per cent. premium, but he takes the chance.

It ain't a case of bein' able to stroll in any time, either. In order to make it he has to conceal himself in the shrubbery before sundown, when the general public is chased out of the grounds and a guard set at the gates. Perhaps it was worth it, though, for Don Pedro says the Señorita Donna Mario is a lovely lady; at least, she was then.

Anyway, the two of 'em pulled it off successful, and they was snuggled up on a marble bench gettin' real well acquainted—maybe callin' each other by their first names and whisperin' mushy sentiments in the moonshine—when the heavy villain enters with stealthy tread.

It seems that Donna Mario had been missed from the Palace. Finally the word gets to Uncle, and although he's a grizzly old pirate, he can remember back when he was young himself. Maybe he had one of his sporty secretaries in

mind, or some gay young first lieutenant. However it was, he connected with a first-class hunch that on a night like this, if the lovely Donna Mario had strayed out anywhere she would sooner or later camp down on a marble bench.

Whether he picked the right garden seat first rattle out of the box, or made two or three misses, I don't know. But when he does crash in he finds the pair just going to a clinch. He ain't the kind of an uncle, either, who would stand off and chuckle a minute before interrupt-in' with a mild "Tut—tut, now, young folks!" No. He's a reg'lar movie drama uncle. He gets purple in the gills. He snorts through his mustache. He gurgles out the Spanish for "Ha, ha!". Then he unlimbers a sword like a corn-knife, reaches out a rough hairy paw, and proceeds to yank our young hero rudely from the fond embrace. Just like that.

And here again I missed a detail or two. I couldn't make out if it was the pink thatch of Yohness that gave him away, or whether Uncle could tell an American just by the feel of his neck. But the old boy got wise right away.

"What," says he, like he was usin' the words as a throat gargle. "A curs-ed Gr-r-ringo! For that you shall both die."

Which was just where, like most movie uncles, he overdid the part. Yohness might not have been particular whether he went on livin' or not.

He hadn't acted as though he cared much. But he wasn't going to let a nice girl like the Donna Mario get herself carved up by an impulsive relative who wore fuzzy face whiskers and a yellow sash instead of a vest.

"Ah, ditch the tragic stuff, Old Sport, while I sketch out how it was all my fault," says he, or words to that effect.

"G-r-r-r!" says Uncle, slashin' away enthusiastic with his sword.

If our hero had been a second or so late in his moves there would be little left to add. But heroes never are. And when this Cap. Yohness party got into action he was a reg'lar bear-cat. The wicked steel merely swished through the space he'd just left and before Uncle could get in another swing something heavy landed on him and he was being gripped in four places. Before the old boy knew what was happening, too, that yellow sash had been unwound and he'd been tied up as neat as an express package. All he lacked to go on the wagon was an address tag and a "Prepaid" label gummed on his tummy.

"Sorry," says Yohness, rollin' him into the shrubbery with his toe, "but you mustn't act so mussy when the young lady has a caller."

"Ah! Eso es espantoso!" says Donna Mario, meaning that now he had spilled the beans for fair. "You must fly. I must—we must both flee."

"Oh, very well," says Yohness. "That is, if the fleeing is good."

"Here! Quick!" says she, grabbin' up the long cloak Uncle had been wearing before he started something he couldn't finish. "And this also," she adds, handin' Yohness a military cap with a lot of gold braid on it. "We will go together. The guards know me. They will think you are my uncle. Wait! I will call the carriage, as if for our evening drive."

"Now that," says I, as Don Pedro gets to this part of the yarn, "was what I call good work done. Made a clean getaway, did they?"

He nods, and goes on to tell how, when they got to the city limits, El Capitan chucked the driver and footman off the box, took the reins himself and drove until near daybreak, when he dropped the fair Donna Mario at the house of an old friend and then beat it down the pike until he saw a chance to leave the outfit and make a break into the woods.

"And I expect he was willin' to call it a night after that, eh?" says I. "Reg'lar thrill hound, wasn't he? What became of him?"

"Ah!" says Don Pedro. "It is for that I come to you."

"Oh, yes, so you have," says I. "I'd most forgotten. Yes, yes! You still have the idea I can trace out Yohness for you? Suppose I could, though, how would you be sure it was

the same one, after so many years? Got any mark on him that——”

“Listen,” says Don Pedro. “El Capitan Yohness possesses a ring of peculiar setting—pale gold—a large dark ruby in it. This was given him that night by the Señorita Donna Mario. He swore to her never to part with it until they should meet again. They never have, nor will. She is no more. For years she lived hidden, in fear of her life. Then the war came. Her uncle was driven back to Spain. Later her friend died, but she left to Donna Mario her estate, many acres of valuable sugar plantation, and the house, Casa Fuerta. It is this estate which Donna Mario in turn has willed to her valiant lover. I am one of the executors. So I ask you where is El Capitan Yohness?”

“Yes, I know you do,” says I. “But why ask me? How do you hook up the Corrugated Trust with any such wild——”

“See,” says Don Pedro, producin’ a yellow old letter. “This came to Donna Mario just before the war. It is on the note paper of your firm.”

“Why, that’s so!” says I. “Must have been when we were in the old building, long before my time. But as far as—Say, the name ain’t Yohness. It’s Jones, plain as day.”

“Yes, Yohness,” says Don Pedro, spellin’ it out loud, “Y-o-n-e-s. You see, in Spanish we call it Yohness.”

He don't say it just like that, either, but that's as near as I can get it. Anyway, you'd never recognize it as Jones.

"Well," I goes on, "I don't know of anybody around the place now who would fit your description. In fact, I don't believe there's anybody by the name of—Yes, there is one Jones here, but he can't be the party. He isn't that kind of a Jones."

"But if he is Señor Jones—who knows?" insists Don Pedro.

Then I has to stop and grin. Huh! Old Jonesey bein' suspected of ever pullin' stuff like that. Say, why not have him in and tax him with it. "Just a sec.," says I. "You can take a look yourself."

I finds Jonesey with his head in a file drawer, as usual, and without spillin' anything of the joke I leads him in and lines him up in front of Don Pedro.

"Listen, Jonesey," says I. "This gentleman comes from Havana. Were you ever there?"

"Why, ye-e-e-es. Once I was," says Jonesey, sort of draggy, as if tryin' to remember.

"You were?" says I. "How? When?"

"It—it was a long time ago," says Jonesey.

"Perdone," breaks in Don Pedro. "Were you not known as Señor El Capitan?"

"Me?" says Jonesey. "Why—I—some might have called me that."

"Great guns!" I gasps. "See here, Jonesey; you don't mean to say you've got the ring too?"

"The ring?" says he, tryin' to look blank. But at the same time I notice his hand go up to his shirt front sort of jerky.

"The ring of the Señorita Donna Mario," cuts in Don Pedro eager.

That don't get any hysterical motions out of him, though. He just stands there, lookin' from one to the other of us slow and dazed, as if something was tricklin' down into his brain. Once or twice he rubs a dingy hand over his bald head. It seemed to help.

"Donna Mario, Donna Mario," he repeats, half under his breath.

"Yes," says I. "And isn't that something like the ring you're coverin' up there under your shirt bosom? Let's see."

Without a word he unbuttons his collar, slips a looped string over his head, and holds out a ring. It's a big ruby set in pale gold.

"That is the ring of Donna Mario," says Don Pedro.

"Hal-lup," says I. "Jonesey, do you mean to say you're the same one who sailed with Dynamite Johnny, risked your neck to go pok-ing around Havana, made love to the Governor General's niece, trussed him up like a roasting turkey when he interfered, and escaped with her in the palace coach through whole rafts

of soldiers who'd have been made rich for life if they'd shot you on sight? You!"

"That—that was a long time ago," says Jonesey.

And if you will believe me, that's about all he would say. Wasn't even much excited over the fact that a hundred thousand dollar sugar plantation was about to be wished on him. Oh, yes, he'd go down with Don Pedro and take possession. Was the grave of Donna Mario there? Then he would go, surely.

"I—I would rather like to," says Old Jonesey.

"Huh," says I. "You better stick around until tomorrow noon. I want you to hear what I've got to feed to that bond-room bunch."

Jonesey shakes his head. No, he'd rather not. And as he shuffles back to his old files I hears him mumblin', sort of soft and easy: "Donna Mario. Ah, yes! Donna Mario!"

Which proves, don't it, that you can't always tell. Even when the party has such a common name as Jones.

CHAPTER XI

AS LUCY LEE PASSED BY

SOMEONE put on that Tales of Hoffman record, please, with a soft needle. Thanks. Now if you'll turn out all but one bulb in the old rose-shaded electrolier and pass the chocolate marshmallows maybe I'll try to sketch out for you this Lucy Lee-Peyton Pratt version of the sweetest story ever told.

We got Lucy Lee on the bounce, as it were. She really hadn't come all the way up from Atlanta to visit Vee even if they were old boardin'-school chums. No, she was on her way to a house party up in Lenox and was fillin' in the time before that happened by making a duty stay with an old maid aunt who lived on Madison Avenue. But when it develops that Auntie is taking the buttermilk cure for dyspepsia, has grown too deaf to enjoy the theater, and is bugs over manipulatin' the Ouija board, Lucy Lee gets out her address book and begins callin' up old friends.

I don't know how far down Vee was on the list but she seems to be the first one to fall easy. When she hears how bored Lucy Lee is

on Madison Avenue she insists on her coming right out with us. So I get my orders to round up Lucy Lee when I'm through at the office and tow her out home. Hence this openin' scene in the taxi where I finds myself being sized up coy and curious.

There's only one way of describin' Lucy Lee. She's a sweet young thing. Nothing big or bouncy about her. No. One of these half-portions. But cute and kittenish from the tip of her double A pumps to the floppy hat brim which only half hides a dangerous pair of eyes.

"So good of you, Mr. Ballard," says she, shootin' over a shy look, "to take all this trouble for poor little me."

"It's a gift," says I. "Comes natural. What about baggage?"

"I've sent a few things by express," says she. "Thank you so much, Mr.—er—Do you know, I've heard such a lot about you from dear Vee that I simply must call you Torchy."

"If it's a case of must," says I, "then go to it."

I'll admit it was a bit sudden, but Lucy Lee is such a chummy young party, and so easy to get acquainted with, that it don't seem odd after the first few times. First off she wants to know all about the baby, and when I've shown her the latest snap-shot, and quoted a couple of his bright remarks, translated free, she announces right off that he must be wonderful.

“Sim-ply wonderful!” is Lucy Lee’s way of puttin’ it, as she gazes admirin’ at me.

Course, I don’t deny it. Then she wants to know how long we’ve been living out on Long Island, and what the house is like, and about my work with the Corrugated Trust, and as I give her the details she listens with them big eyes gettin’ wider and wider.

“Simp-ly wonderful!” says Lucy Lee.

And somehow, just by workin’ that system, she begins to register. First off I was only kind of amused by it. But before we’d driven a dozen blocks I was being rapidly convinced that here, at last, was somebody who really understood. You know how it is. You feel that you’re a great strong noble man, so wise in the head that there’s no use tryin’ to conceal it from eyes like that; and yet so kind and generous that you don’t mind talking to any simple young person who might be helped by it.

Oh, yes. A half hour with Lucy Lee and you’re apt to need an elastic hat band. You never knew you could reel off such entertainin’ chat. Why, without half tryin’ I could start that ripply laugh of hers going and get the dimples playin’ tag with her blushes. By the time we gets home I feels like a reg’lar guy.

“Cute little thing, ain’t she?” I remarks to Vee durin’ the forty minute wait while Lucy Lee dresses for dinner.

“Oh, yes,” says Vee, with a knowin’ smile.

“That is her specialty, I believe. She’s a dear though, even if she doesn’t mean quite all of it.”

“Ah, why wake me up!” says I, grinnin’.

It was next mornin’ though that I got my big jolt, when an express truck backs up with about a ton of baggage. There was only two wardrobe trunks, a hat trunk, and a steamer trunk, and the men unloads ’em all.

“Hal-lup!” says I, when they staggers in with the last one. “Who’s movin’ in?”

Seems it’s the few little things that Lucy Lee needs for the week-end. “I’ve told her to send for her maid,” says Vee. “It was stupid of me not to think of that before, knowing Lucy Lee.”

And later, when I’ve been called in to help undo the straps, I gets a glimpse of the exhibit. Morning and afternoon frocks in one, evening gowns in another, the steamer trunk full of shoes, besides all the hats.

“Huh!” says I, on the side to Vee. “Carries all her own scenery, don’t she? Say, there’s enough to outfit a Ziegfeld song revue.”

What got the biggest gasp out of me though, was when Lucy Lee unpacks her collection of framed photos and ranges ’em on the mantel and dressin’-table. More’n a dozen, all men.

“You don’t mean, Lucy Lee,” says Vee, “that these are all—er—on the active list?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” says Lucy Lee, springin’ the baby stare. “They

are simply some of my men friends. For instance, this is dear old Major Knight, who's chairman of some board or other that Daddy is a director on. He is so jolly and is always saying—Well, never mind that. This one is Victor Norris, who tried so hard to get into aviation and was just about to fly when the war had to go and end it. He's a perfectly heavenly dancer. Then there's poor Arthur Kirby, only a secretary to some senator, but such a nice boy. And the one in the naval uniform is Dick—er—Well, I met him at a dinner in Washington just before he got his discharge and he told me so many thrilling things about chasing submarines in the North Sea or—or the Mediterranean or somewhere. Hasn't he nice eyes, though? And this next one——"

Well, I forget the rest for about then I got busy wonderin' how she could keep the run of 'em all without the aid of a card index. But she could. To Lucy Lee life must seem like a parade, she being the given point. Which was where I begun to agree with Vee that there ought to be a fourth plate put on the table, for over Sunday, at least.

"But who'll I get?" I asks.

"Silly!" says Vee. "A man, of course. Any man."

"All right," says I. "I'll try to collect somebody, even if I have to draft Piddie."

Saturday afternoon is apt to be more or less

of a busy time at the Corrugated though, so it's near noon before I remembers my promise and begins to look around panicky. No, Mr. Piddie couldn't oblige. He'd planned to take the fam'ly to the Bronx. Sudders, our assistant auditor, was booked for an all day golf orgie. I'd almost decided to kidnap Vincent, our fair-haired office boy with the parlor manners, when I happened to pass through the bond room and gets a glimpse of this Peyton Pratt person lingerin' at his desk. He's diggin' a time-table out of a suitcase.

"Whither away, Peyton?" says I.

"Oh!" says he, sighin' discontented. "I suppose I must run up and spend the day with my married sister in New Haven."

"Why act so tickled over it?" says I.

"But I'm not, really," says Peyton. "It isn't that I am not fond of Ethel, and all that sort of thing. Walter—that's her husband—is a good sort, too, and the children are nice enough. But it's quite a trip to take for such a short visit—and rather expensive, you know. I've just been figuring up."

So he had. There on an office pad he's jotted down every item, including the cost of a ten-word day message and the price of a box of candy for the youngsters. He hadn't sent the wire yet, or bought the candy.

"Got your dinner coat in there?" I asks, noddin' to the suitcase.

He says he has.

"Then listen," says I. "Cross New Haven off the map for this time and lemme put you next to a week-end that won't set you back a nickel. Haven't seen my place out on Long Island yet, have you; or met the new heir to the house of Torchy?"

"Why—why, no, I haven't," hesitates Peyton.

"High time, then," says I. "It'll all be on me, even to lettin' you punch in on my trip ticket. Eh? What say?"

Havin' known Peyton Pratt for some years I could pretty near call the turn. That free round trip ought to be big casino for him. And it was. Course, he protests polite how he couldn't allow me to put up for his fare, and adds that he's heard so much about my charmin' little fam'ly that he can't really afford to miss such a chance.

"Sure you can't!" says I, smotherin' a grin.

Not that Peyton is one of your common cheap skates. That ain't the idea at all. He's a bud-din' financier, Peyton is; one of these little-red-notebook heroes, who wear John D. mottoes pasted in their hats and can tell you just how Carnegie or Armour or Shonts or any of them sainted souls laid up their first ten thousand.

He's got all that thrift dope down fine, Peyton has. Why, he don't lick a postage stamp of his own but it gets entered in the little old ex-

pense account along with the extra doughnut he plunged on at the dairy lunch. He knows that's the way to win out for he's read it in magazine articles and I'll bet every time he passes the Sub-Treasury he lifts his lid reverent.

I expect it's something Peyton was born to, for his old man was a bank cashier and his two older brothers already have their names up on window grills, he tells me, while an uncle of his is vice-president of an insurance company. So it's no wonder Peyton is a reg'lar coupon hound. His idea of light readin' is to sit down with "Talks to Investors" on one knee and the market report on the other. Give him a forenoon off and he'd spend it down at the Clearing House watchin' 'em strike the daily balance. Uh-huh. The only way he can write U. S. is in a monogram—like this—\$\$

Not such a bad-lookin' chap though; tall, slim and dark, with a long straight nose and a well-developed chin. Course he's got kind of a bilious indoor complexion, and them thick glasses don't add to his beauty. You can imagine too, that his temperament ain't exactly frivolous. Hardly! Yet he thinks he's a great jollier when he wants to be. Also he likes to have me kid him about bein' such a finicky dresser, for while he never splurges on anything sporty, he's always neat and well dressed.

"Who's the little queen that all this is done for?" I asks him once.

“When I have picked her out I’ll let you know, Torchy,” says he, blinkin’ foxy.

Later on though he tells me all about it confidential. He admits likin’ well enough to run around with nice girls when it can be done without danger of being worked for orchestra seats or taxi fares. But there was no sense gettin’ in deep with any particular one until a feller was sure of a five figure income, at least.

“Huh!” says I. “Then you got time enough to train one up from the cradle.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” says he. “Anyway, I shall wait until I find one with tastes as simple as my own.”

“You may,” says I, “and then again—Well, I’ve seen wiser guys than you rushed off their feet by fluffy young parties whose whole stock in trade was a pair of misbehavin’ eyes.”

“Pooh!” says Peyton. “I’ve been exposed to that sort of thing as often as anyone. I think I’m immune.”

“Maybe you are,” I has to admit.

So as I tows Peyton out to the house that afternoon I kind of hands it to myself that I’ve filled Vee’s order. And there standing on the front veranda admirin’ the lilacs is Lucy Lee in one of her plain little frocks—a pink and white check—lookin’ as fresh and dainty and inexpensive as a prize exhibit from an orphan asylum.

I whispers to Vee on the side: “Well, you see I got him. Peyton’s someone she can prac-

tice on, too, and no harm done. He's case hardened."

"Really," says Vee, lookin' him over.

"Admits it himself," says I.

"Oh, well, then!" says Vee, with one of her quizzin' smiles.

And at first it looked like Peyton was about to qualify as an all-'round exempt. He barely seemed to see Lucy Lee. While she was unreelin' the sprightly chatter he was inspectin' the baby, or talkin' with Vee, or askin' fool questions about the garden. Hardly takes a second glance at Lucy Lee. I expect he had her sized up as about sixteen. He could easy make that mistake.

Maybe that's what started her in on this brisk offensive at dinner. Nothing high-school girly about Lucy Lee when she floats down the stairs at 7:15. It's a grown-up evenin' gown she's wearin' this time. No doubt then whether or not she'd had her comin' out. The only question was where she was going to stop comin' out. Not that it wasn't simple enough, but it sure was skimpy above the belt.

After his first gasp you could see Peyton sittin' up and takin' notice. Couldn't very well help it, either, for Lucy Lee sure had the net out. I hadn't noticed them big innocent eyes of hers brought into full play before but now she cuts loose regardless. And Peyton, he is right in range. She's givin' him samples of them Oh-

you-great-big-wonderful man looks. You know. And inside of ten minutes Peyton don't know whether he's bein' passed the peas or is being elected second vice-president of something.

And I'd always classed Peyton as a cold storage proposition! You should see the way he thaws out, though. Why, he tells funny stories, throws off repartee, and spreads himself generally. That long sallow face of his got tinted up like he'd had a beauty parlor treatment, and his serious eyes got to sparklin' behind the thick panes.

As for Vee and me, we swapped an amused glance now and then and enjoyed the performance. After the coffee, when Lucy Lee has led him out on the east terrace to see the full moon come up, they just naturally camped down in a swing seat and opened up the confidential chat. By the deep rumble we could tell that Peyton was carryin' the big end of the conversation.

"I know," says I. "Lucy Lee is makin' him tell how he's goin' to have Wall Street eatin' out of his hand some day, and every once in a while she's remarkin': 'Why, Mr. Pratt! I think you're wonderful; simply wonderful!'"

"But I thought you said," puts in Vee, "that he was—er—case hardened?"

"Oh, he's just playin' the game," says I. "Maybe it's gone to his head a little tonight, but when it comes time to duck—You'll see."

One of my pet notions has always been that

breakfast time is the true acid test for this romance stuff. Specially for girls. But next morning Lucy Lee shows up in another little gingham effect, lookin' as fresh and smilin' as a bed of tulips. And the affair continues right on from there. It lasts all day and all that evenin' except when Lucy Lee was makin' another quick change, which she does about four times accordin' to my count. And each costume is complete—dress, hat, shoes, stockings all matchin'. The only restless motions Peyton makes, too, are durin' these brief waits.

"Entertainin' young party, eh?" I suggests to him as Lucy Lee does one of her sudden flits.

"A most interesting and charming girl," says Peyton.

"Some class, too. What?" I adds.

"If you mean that she dresses in excellent taste, I agree with you," says he. "Such absolute simplicity, and yet——" Peyton spreads out his hands eloquent. "Why can't all girls do that?" he asks. "It would be—er—such a saving. I've no doubt she makes them all herself."

"If she does," says I, "she must have put in a busy winter."

"Oh, I don't know," says Peyton. "They're all such simple little things. And then, you know—or possibly you don't—that Lucy—er—I mean Miss Vaughn, is a surprisingly capable

young woman. Really. There's so much more to her than appears on the surface."

"Tut, tut, Peyton!" says I. "Ain't you gettin' in kind of deep?"

"Don't be absurd, Torchy," says he. "Just because I show a little natural interest in a charming young woman it doesn't follow that——"

"Look!" says I. "Someone's givin' you the come-on signal."

Course, it's Lucy Lee. She's changed to an afternoon costume, sort of an old blue effect with not a frill or a ruffle in sight but with everything toned in, from the spider-webby hat to the suede slippers. And all she has to do to bring Peyton alongside is to tilt her chin invitin'.

We only caught glimpses of 'em the whole afternoon. And that Sunday evenin' the porch swing worked overtime again. I know both Vee and me did a lot of yawnin' before they finally drifts in. I'd never seen Peyton quite so chirky. He even goes so far as to smoke a cigarette. And next mornin', as he leaves reluctant with me to catch the 8:03 express, he stops me at the gate to give me the hearty grip.

"I say, old man," says he husky, "I—I never can tell you how grateful I am for—for what you've done."

"Then let's forget it," says I.

"Forget!" says he, smilin' mushy. "Never!"

At lunch time he asks me which of the Fifth Avenue photographers I think is the best.

“Eh?” says I, grinnin’. “Thinkin’ of havin’ yourself mugged and sendin’ the result to somebody in a silver frame?”

“Well,” says he draggy, “I—I’ve been meaning to have some pictures taken for several years, and now——”

“Got you,” says I. “But if you want something real swell let me tow you to a place I know of on Fifty-fifth.”

Honest, I wasn’t thinking about the Maison Noir at the time or that it was just next door. In fact, it was Peyton himself who stops in front of the show window and grabs me by the arm.

“I say!” says he, pointin’ in at the exhibit. “See—see there.”

He’s pointin’ to a display of checked gingham frocks, blue and white and pink and white, with hats to match.

“Yes,” says I, “do look sort of familiar, don’t they?”

“Why,” he goes on, “they’re almost exactly like those of—of Lucy’s; the same simple lines, the same material and everything.”

“Classy stuff,” says I. “Come along, though. The picture place is next door, upstairs.”

Peyton still stands there gawpin’. “Such a coincidence,” he’s murmurin’. “I wonder,

Torchy, if one could find out about how much they ask for such things in a place like this."

"Easiest thing in the world," says I. "Just blow in and get 'em to give you quotations."

"Oh, but I wouldn't dare do that," says he. "It would seem so—so——"

"Not at all," says I. "As it happens, this joint is one where Vee does more or less shop-pin', when she's feelin' flush, and I've often been with her. If you're curious we'll breeze in and get their prices."

Peyton was right there with the curiosity, too. And the lady vamp with the long string of beads danglin' from her neck didn't seem to think it odd for us to be interested in checked gingham.

"Ah, yes-s-s!" says she, throwin' open the back doors of the show window. "Zey are great bargains, those. Marked down but las' week. Thees wan—m-m-m-m—only \$68; but wiz ze hat also, \$93."

And the gasp that gets out of Peyton sounds like openin' an airbrake.

"Nine-ty three dollars!" says he. "For a simple little thing like that? Why, that seems to be rather exorbitant!"

"Mais non!" says the lady vamp, shruggin' her shoulders. "They are what you call simple, yes. But they are chic, too. One considers that. Las' week come a young lady from Atlanta who

in one hour takes two dozen at once, and more next day. You see!"

Peyton was beginning to see. But he wanted to be dead sure. "From Atlanta?" says he. "Not—not a—a Miss Vaughn?"

"Mais oui!" says Madame, clappin' her hands enthusiastic. "The ver' one. You know her? Yes?"

"I—I thought I did," says Peyton, sort of weak, as he starts for the door.

He calls off the picture proposition. Says he ain't quite in the mood. And all that day he seems to have something on his mind that he couldn't unload. Three or four times he seems to be just on the point of statin' it to me but never can quite get a start. And next day he's a good deal the same. He was like that when I left the office about 4 p.m. to catch an early train. I could about guess what was troublin' him.

So I wasn't much surprised, just before dinner to see Peyton appearin' at our front gate.

"I—I'm sure I don't know what you'll think of me, Torchy," he begins apologizin', "but I—I just had to——"

"Too bad!" says I. "You're only four hours late. Lucy Lee left for Lenox on the 2:10."

"Gone!" says he. "But I thought——"

"Yes, she did plan to stay longer," says I, "but it was a bit slow for her here, and when

she got a wire that a certain Captain Wright was to be at his sister's for a few days' furlough—Well, inside of an hour she and her maid had packed and were on their way. Oh, yes, and there goes the rest of Lucy Lee's baggage now."

The express truck was just rollin' around from the side door. Peyton stares at the load goggle-eyed. "But—but you don't mean that all of those trunks are hers?" he demands.

"Uh-huh," says I. "I helped strap 'em up. And one of them wardrobes, Peyton, carries about twenty-five of those little checked dresses. The hats go in the square affair, and the shoes in the steamer trunk. Thirty-eight pairs, I believe. Just enough for a week-end. Then in that bulgy-topped trunk——"

But Peyton ain't listenin'. He's just standin' there, with a dazed, stunned look in his eyes like he'd just been missed by an express train. But his lips are movin'. I got the idea. He was doin' mental arithmetic—twenty-five times ninety-three. And he was gettin' a picture of a thousand dollar income lyin' flat on its back.

When he comes to he asks me faint when he can get back to town. No, he won't stay for dinner. "Thank you," says he, "but I couldn't. I'm too much upset. I fear that I—I've made a dreadful mistake, Torchy."

"About Lucy Lee?" says I. "Don't worry. All you've done is come near contributin' an-

other silver frame to her collection. You just happened to find a free field, that's all. Otherwise it would have been a case where you'd stood in line."

Course Peyton don't believe a word of it. He still thinks he's had a desperate affair. He don't know whether he's safe yet or not. All he can see is rows and rows of figures assaultin' that poor little expense book of his. I expect he thinks he's entitled to wear a wound stripe over his heart.

Yesterday we had a bread-and-butter note from Lucy Lee mostly telling what a whale of a time she was havin' up at Lenox.

"Anything about Peyton?" I asks.

"Why, no," says Vee. "But she says the dear captain is——"

"I know," says I. "Simp-ly wonderful."

CHAPTER XII

TORCHY MEETS ELLERY BEAN

COURSE, I was sayin' it mostly to kid Vee along. I expect I'm nearly as strong for this suburban life stuff as she is, but whenever she gets a bit gushy about it, which she's apt to such nights as we've been havin' recent, with the moon full and the summer strikin' its first stride, I'm apt to let on that I feel different.

You see, she'd towed me out on the back terrace to smell how sweet the honeysuckle was and watch the moon sail up over the tall locust trees beyond the vegetable garden.

"Isn't it a perfectly gorgeous night, Torchy?" says she. "And doesn't everything look so calm and peaceful out here?"

"May look that way," says I, "but you never can tell. I like the country in the daytime all right, but at night, especially these moony ones,—Well, I don't know as I'll ever get used to 'em."

"How absurd, Torchy!" says Vee.

"Makes things look so kind of spooky," I goes on. "All them shadows. How do you know what's behind 'em? And so many queer noises. There! Listen to that!"

"Silly!" says she. "That's a tree-toad. I hope you aren't afraid of that."

"Not if he's a tame one," says I. "But how can you tell he ain't wild? And there comes a whirry-buzzin' noise."

"Yes," says she. "A motor coming down the macadam. There, it's turned into our road! Perhaps someone coming to see us, Goosie."

Sure enough, it was. A minute later Mr. and Mrs. Robert Ellins were givin' us the hail out front. It seems they'd come to pick us up to make a call with them on some new neighbors.

"Who?" asks Vee.

"You couldn't guess," says Mrs. Robert. "The Zoscoss."

"Really!" says Vee. "I thought they were——"

"Yes," chimes in Mrs. Robert, "I suppose they are, too. Rather impossible. But I simply must try that big pipe organ I hear they've put in. Bob thinks it's an awful thing to do. See how shocked he looks. But I've promised not to stay more than half an hour if the movie magnate is in anything more startling than a placid after-dinner state, or if the place is cluttered up with too many screen favorites. And I think Bob wants Torchey to go along as body-guard. So won't you both come? What do you say?"

Trust Vee for takin' a dare. She'll try anything once. I expect she'd been some curious

all along to see what this new Mrs. Zosco looked like. "What was it you said she used to be called, Torchy?" she demands.

" 'Myrtle Mapes, the Girl With the Million Dollar Smile,' was the way she was billed," says I. "But them press agents don't care what they say half the time. And maybe she only smiles that way when the camera's set for a close-up."

"I don't care," says Vee. "I think it would be great fun to go."

As for me, I didn't mind, one way or the other. I'd seen this Andres Zosco party plenty of times, ridin' back and forth on the train. He'd even offered to pick me up in his limousine and give me a lift once when I was hikin' up from the station. And I must say he wasn't just my idea of a plute movie producer.

Nothin' imposin' about Mr. Zosco. Hardly. Kind of a dumpy, short-legged party, with a round smooth face, sort of mild brown eyes, and his hair worn in a skinned diamond effect. You'd never take him for a guy who'd go out and buy a Hudson River steamer and blow it up just for the sake of gettin' a thousand feet of film, or put on a mob scene with enough people to fill Times Square like an election night. No. He was usually readin' seed catalogues and munchin' salted peanuts out of a paper bag.

It was early last spring that he'd bought

this Villa Nova place, a mile or so beyond the Ellinses, and moved out with the bride he'd picked out of his list of screen stars. I don't know whether he expected the Piping Rock crowd to fall for him or not. Anyway, they didn't. They just shuddered when his name was mentioned and stayed away from Villa Nova same as they had when that Duluth copper plute, who'd built the freak near-Moorish affair, tried the same act. But it didn't look like the Zoscoss meant to be frozen out so easy. After being lonesome for a month or so they begun fillin' their 20 odd bedrooms with guests of their own choosin'. Course, some of 'em that I saw arrivin' looked a bit rummy, but it was plain the Zoscoss didn't intend to bank on the neighbors for company. Maybe they didn't want us crashin' in either, as Mr. Robert suggests.

You couldn't worry Mrs. Robert with hints like that, though. She's a good mixer. Besides, if she'd made up her mind to play that new pipe organ you could pretty near bet she'd do it. So inside of three minutes she had us loaded into the car and off we rolls to surprise the Zoscoss.

Villa Nova, you know, is perched on the top of quite a sizable hill, with a private road windin' up from the Pike. As you swing in you pass an odd-shaped vine-covered affair that I suppose was meant for a gate-keeper's lodge,

though it looks like a stucco tower that had been dropped off some storage warehouse.

Well, we'd just made the turn and Mr. Robert had gone into second to take the grade when I gets a glimpse of somebody doin' a hasty duck into the shrubbery; a slim, skinny party with a plaid cap pulled down over his eyes so far that his ears stuck out on either side like young wings. What struck me as kind of odd, though, was his jumpin' away from the door of the lodge as the car swung in and the fact that he had a basket covered with a white cloth.

"Huh!" says I, more or less to myself.

"What's the matter?" asks Vee. "Seeing things in the moonlight?"

"Thought I did," says I. "Didn't you, there by the gate?"

"Oh, yes," says she. "Some lilac bushes."

And not being any too sure of just what I had seen I let it ride at that. Besides, there wasn't time for any lengthy debate. Next thing I knew we'd pulled up under the porte cochère and was pilin' out. We finds the big double doors wide open and the pink marble entrance hall all lit up brilliant. Grouped in the middle of it, in front of a fountain banked with ferns, are about a dozen people who seem to be chatterin' away earnest and excited.

"Why, how odd!" says Mrs. Robert, hesitat-in' with her thumb on the bell button.

"Looks like a fam'ly caucus," says I.

"Maybe they heard we were coming and are taking a vote to see whether they let us in or bar us out."

I could make out Andres Zosco in the center of the bunch wearin' a silk-faced dinner coat and chewin' nervous on a fat black cigar. Also I could guess that the tall chemical blonde at his right must be the celebrated Myrtle Mapes that used to smile on us from so many billboards. To the left was a huge billowy female decorated generous with pearl ropes and ear pendants. Then there was a funny little old guy in a cutaway and a purple tie, a couple of squatty, full-chested women dressed as fancy as a pair of plush sofas, a maid or so, and a pie-faced scared-lookin' gink that it was easy to guess must be the butler. Everybody had been so busy talkin' that they hadn't heard us swarm up the steps.

"I say," whispers Mr. Robert, "hadn't we better call it off?"

"And never know what is going on?" protests Vee. "Certainly not. I'm going to knock." Which she does.

"There!" says I. "You've touched off the panic."

For a minute it looked like she had, too, for most of 'em jumps startled, or clutches each other by the arm. Then they sort of surges towards the doorway, Zosco in the lead.

I expect he must have recognized some of us

for he indulges in a cackly, throaty laugh and then waves us in cordial. "Excuse me," says he. "I—thought it might be somebody else. Mr. Ellins, isn't it? Pleased to meet you. Come right in, all of you."

And after we've been introduced sketchy all round Mr. Robert remarks that he's afraid we haven't picked just the right time to pay a call. "We—we are interrupting a family council or something, aren't we?" he asks.

"Oh, glad to have you," says Zosco. "It's nothing secret, and perhaps you can help us out. We're a little upset, for a fact. It's about my brother Jake. He's been visiting us, him and his wife, for the past week. Maybe you've seen him ridin' round in the limousine—short, thick-set party, good deal like me, only a few years younger."

Mr. Robert shakes his head. "Sorry," says he, "but I don't recall——"

"Oh, likely you wouldn't notice him," goes on Zosco. "Nothing fancy about Jake, plain dresser and all that. But what gets us is how he could have lost himself for so long."

"Lost?" echoes Mr. Robert.

"Well, he's gone, anyway," says Zosco. "Disappeared. Since after dinner last night and——"

"Oh, Jake, Jake!" wails the billowy female with the pearl ropes.

"There, there, Matilda!" put in Zosco.

“Never mind the sob stuff now. He’s all right somewhere, of course. He’ll turn up in time. Bound to. It ain’t as if he was some wild young sport. Steady as a church, Jake. No bad habits to speak of. Not one of the kind to go slippin’ into town on a spree. Not him. And never carries around much ready money or jewelry. No holdup men out here, anyway.”

“But—but he’s gone!” moans Matilda.

“Sure he is,” admits Zosco. “Maybe back to Saginaw. Something might have happened at the store. Or he might have got word that some cloak and suit jobber was closing out his fall goods at a sacrifice and got so busy in town making the deal that he forgot to let us know. That would be Jake, all right, if he saw a chance of turnin’ over a few thousands.”

“Would he go bareheaded, and without his indigestion tablets?” demands Mrs. Jake.

“If it was another bargain like that lot of army raincoats, he’d go in his pajamas,” says Zosco.

But Matilda shakes her head. She’s sure something awful has happened to Jake. Now that she thinks it over she believes he must have had something on his mind. Hadn’t they noticed how restless he’d been for the past few days? Yes, both the squatty women had. And the funny little guy in the long-tailed cutaway brought up how Jake had quit playing billiards

with him, even after he'd offered to start him 20 up.

"But that don't mean anything," says Zosco. "Jake never could play billiards anyway. Hates it. He's no sport at all, except maybe when it comes to pinochle. He's all for business. Don't know how to take a real vacation like a gentleman. I'm always telling him that."

Gradually we'd all drifted into the big drawin' room, but Jake continues to be the general topic. We couldn't help but get kind of interested in him, too. When a middle-aged storekeeper from Saginaw gets up from dinner, wanders out into a quiet, respectable community like ours, and disappears like he'd dropped from a manhole or been swished off on an airplane it's enough to set you guessin'. By askin' a few questions we got the whole life history of Jake, from the time he left Lithuania as a boy until he was last seen gettin' a light for his cigar from the butler. We got all his habits outlined; how he always slept with a corner of the sheet over his right ear, couldn't eat strawberries without breaking out in blotches, and could hardly be dragged out to see a show or go to an evening party where there were ladies. Yet here on a visit to Villa Nova he goes and strays off like he'd lost his mind, or gets himself kidnapped, or worse.

"Why," says Mr. Robert, "it sounds like a

real mystery, almost a case for a Sherlock Holmes."

I don't know why, either, but just then he glances at me. "By Jove!" he goes on. "Here you are, Torch. What do you make out of this?"

"Me?" says I. "Just about what you do, I expect."

"Oh, come!" says he. "Put that rapid fire brain of yours to work. Try him, Mr. Zosco. I've known him to unravel stranger things than this. I would even venture to say that he has hit on a clue while we've been talking."

Course, a good deal of it is Mr. Robert's josh. He's always springin' that line. But Zosco, after he's looked me over keen, shrugs his shoulders doubtful. Mrs. Jake, though, is ready to grab at anything.

"Can you find him?" she asks, starin' at me. "Will you, young man?"

Also I gets an encouragin', admirin' glance from Vee. That settles it. I was bound to make some sort of play after that. Besides, I did have kind of a vague hunch.

"I ain't promisin' anything," says I, "but I'll give it a whirl. First off though, maybe you can tell me what youth around the place wears a black-and-white checked cap?"

That gets a quick rise out of the former Myrtle Mapes, now Mrs. Zosco. "Why—why," says she, "my brother Ellery does."

"That's so," put in Zosco. "Where is the youngster?"

"Ellery?" says Myrtle, givin' him that innocent baby-doll look. "Oh, he must be in his room. I—I will look."

"Never mind," says I. "Probably he is. It doesn't matter. Visiting here, too, eh? How long? About two weeks. And he comes from——"

"From my old home, Shelby, North Carolina," says she. "But he isn't the one who's missing, you know."

"That's so," says I. "Gettin' off the track, wasn't I? Shows what a poor sleuth I am. And now if I can have the missing man's hat I'll do a little scoutin' round outside."

"His hat!" grumbles Zosco. "What do you want with that?"

"Why," says I, "if I find anyone it fits it's likely to be Jake, ain't it?"

"Of course," says Matilda. "Here it is," and she hands me a seven and three-quarters hard boiled lid with his initials punched in the sweat band.

That move gave 'em something to chew over anyway, and kind of took their minds off what I'd been askin' about Ellery. For after hearin' about him I knew I hadn't been mistaken about seein' somebody down by the lodge. That's right where I makes for.

As I gets to the bottom of the hill I slips

through the hedge and walks on the grass so if there should be anyone at the gate they wouldn't hear me. And say, that was a reg'lar hunch I'd collected. Standing there in the moonlight is the youth in the checked cap.

Near as I can make out he's a narrow-chested, loose-jawed young hick of 19 or 20 and costumed a good deal like a village sport. You know—slit coat pockets, a high turn-up to his trousers, bunion-toed shoes, and a necktie that must have been designed by a wall-paper artist who'd been shell-shocked. On his left arm he has a basket partly covered by a napkin. Also he's just handin' something in through a little window about a foot above his head.

Course, it don't take any super-brain to guess that there must be another party inside the lodge. What would Ellery be passin' stuff through the window for if there wasn't? And anybody inside couldn't very well get out, for the only door is a heavy, iron-studded affair padlocked on the outside and the little window is covered with an ornamental iron grill. Besides, as I edges up closer, I hears talking going on. It sounds like the inside party is grumblin' over something or other. His voice sounds hoarse and indignant, but I can't get what it's all about. When the youth in the checked cap gave him the come-back though it was clear enough.

“Aw, shut up, you big stiff!” says he.

"You're lucky to get cold chicken and bread and jam. Where do you think I'm goin' to get hot coffee for you, anyway? Ain't I runnin' a chance as it is, swipin' this out of the ice-box after the servants leave? It's more'n you deserve, you crook."

More grumbles from inside.

"Yah, I got the cigars," says the other, "but you don't get 'em until you pass out them dishes. Think I can stick around here all night? And remember, one peep to your pals, or to anyone else, and my trusty guards will start shootin' through the window. Hey? How long? Until we get 'em all into the net. So you might as well quit your belly-achin' and confess."

It was a more or less entertainin' dialogue but I thought I'd enjoy it more if I could hear both sides. So I was workin' my way through the bushes with my ear stretched until I was within almost a yard of the window when I steps on a dry branch that cracks like a cap pistol. In a flash the youth has dropped the basket and whirled on me with a long carvin' knife. Which was my cue for quick action.

"'Sall right, Ellery," says I. "Friend."

"What friend?" he demands, starin' at me suspicious.

"You know," says I, whisperin' mysterious.

"Oh!" says he. "From Headquarters?"

"You've said it," says I.

“But—but how can I tell,” he goes on, “that you ain’t——”

“Look!” says I, throwin’ back my coat and runnin’ my thumb under the armhole of my vest.

Sure it worked. Why, if you flash a nickel-plated suspender buckle quick enough you can pass it for a badge even by daylight.

“I didn’t think you’d get my letter so soon,” says Ellery. “I’m glad you came, though. See, I’ve got one of the gang already. He’s the ringleader, too.”

“Fine work!” says I. “But what’s the plot of the piece? You didn’t make that so clear. Is it a case of——”

“Hist!” says Ellery. “I ain’t told him how much I know. Let’s get off where he can’t hear. Back in the bushes there.”

And when we’ve circled the lodge and put some shrubbery between us and the road Ellery consents to open up.

“They’re tryin’ to do away with Sister Maggie,” says he. “You know who she is—Mrs. Andres Zosco?”

“But I thought she was Myrtle Mapes,” says I.

“Ah, that’s only her screen name,” says Ellery. “It was Maggie Bean back in Shelby, where we come from. And she was Maggie Bean when she went to New York and got that job as a stenog. in old Zosco’s office. It was him

that gave her a chance to act in the movies, you know. Guess she made good, eh? And then Zosco got so stuck on her that he married her. Well, that was all right, too. Course, he's an old pill, but he's got all kinds of dough. Rollin' in it. Maggie's done a lot for the fam'ly, too. Gave me a flivver all for myself last Christmas; took me out of the commission house and started me in at high school again. She's right there with the check book, Maggie.

"That's what makes them other ZoscOs so sore—that Brother Jake and his wife. See? They'd planned all along comin' in for most of his pile themselves. Most likely meant to put him out of the way. But when they comes on and finds the new wife—Well, the game is blocked. It would go to her. So they starts right in to get rid of Maggie. I hadn't been in the house a day before I'd doped that out. I knew there was a plot on to do Maggie."

"You don't say!" says I. "How?"

"Slow poison, I expect," says Ellery. "In her coffee, maybe. Anyway, it had begun to work. Maggie was mopin' around. I found her cryin'. I spotted Jake Zosco right off. You can tell just by lookin' at him that he's that kind. Besides, he acts suspicious. Always prowlin' around restless. Then there's the butler. He's in it, too. I caught him and Jake whisperin' together. I don't know how many more. Some of the maids, maybe, and most

likely a few men on the outside. They might be plannin' to stage a jewel robbery with a double murder and lay it all onto unknown burglars. Get me?"

"Uh-huh!" says I. "But how much have you got on Brother Jake? And how did you come to get him locked up here?"

"Oh, I had the goods on Jake, all right," says Ellery. "After I saw him confabbin' with that crook butler the other night I shadows him constant. I was on his trail when he sneaks down here after dinner. I saw him unlock the lodge house. I heard him fumblin' around inside. Then I slips up and locks him in. Half an hour later down comes the butler and two others of the gang, but when they sees me they beats it. I expect they'd try to rescue him, if they thought he was there. And they may find out any minute."

"That's right," says I. "Lucky I came out just as I did. There's only one thing to do."

"What's that?" asks Ellery.

"Lug Jake up to the house, confront him with the butler, tell 'em they're both pinched, and give 'em the third degree," says I. "You'll see. One or the other will break down and tell the whole plot."

"Say!" gasps Ellery. "Wouldn't that be slick! Just the way they do in the movie dramas, eh?"

I had to smother a chuckle when that came

out, for I'd already recognized some of the symptoms of a motion picture mind while Ellery was sketchin' out this wild tale.

"Go to the movies much down in Shelby?" I asks.

"Most every night," says Ellery. "I used to even before Maggie got into the game. Begun goin' when I was 'leven. At first I was strong for this Wild West stuff, but no more. Give me a good crook drama with a big punch in every reel. They're showin' some corkers lately. I've seen 'em about all. That's how I come to get wise to this plot of Jake Zosco's. Come on! Got your wrist irons ready for him?"

"Oh, I never use the bracelets unless I have to," says I. "I expect he'll toddle along meek enough when he sees the two of us."

I hadn't overstated the case much at that. Course, Jake Zosco has developed more or less of a grouch durin' his 36 hours of solitary confinement, but when Ellery orders him to march out with his hands up he comes right along.

"What foolishness now, you young rough necker?" he demands.

"You'll soon find out how foolish it is," says Ellery. "You're in the hands of the law."

"Wha-a-at!" gasps Jake. "For such a little thing as that? It—it can't be. Who says it of me?"

"Isn't this your hat?" says I, handin' him

the hail-proof kelly. "It is, eh? Then you're the one. Come on, now. Right up to the house."

"It's a foolishness," he protests. "In Saginaw it couldn't be done."

All the way up the hill he mutters and grumbles but he keeps on going. Not until he gets near enough to get a glimpse of all the people in the drawin'-room does he balk.

"Matilda and all!" says he. "Why couldn't we go in by the back?"

"Nothing doin'," says Ellery, flourishing his knife. "You're goin' to face the music, you are."

"That's the way to talk to him, Ellery," says I. "But if you don't mind I think I'd better take charge of him from now on."

"Sure thing," says Ellery. "He's your prisoner."

"Then in you go, Jake," says I. "And don't forget about keepin' the hands up. Now!"

Say, you should have seen that bunch when our high tragedy trio marches in; Ellery with his butcher knife on one side; me on the other; and leadin' in the center Mr. Jake Zosco, his arms above his head, his dinner coat all dusty and wrinkled, and a two days' stubble of whiskers decoratin' his face.

It was Mrs. Jake who got her breath first and swooped down on her little man with wild cries of "Oh, Jake! My own Jakey at last!"

'And in another second his head is all tangled up with the pearl ropes.

Next Andres Zosco comes to. "What is it, a holdup act?" he asks. "Ellery, what you doing with that knife? What's it all about, somebody?"

That seems to be my cue, so I steps to the front. "Sorry, Mr. Zosco," says I, "but Ellery has discovered a deep laid plot."

"Eh?" says Zosco, gawpin'.

"To do away with you and your wife," I goes on. "He says your brother Jake is in it, and Mrs. Jake, and the butler, and maybe a lot of others. Isn't that right, Ellery?"

"Yep," says Ellery. "They're all crooks."

"What confounded tommyrot!" says Zosco. "Why—why, Jake wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Tell what you saw, Ellery," I prompts.

"I heard 'em plottin'," says Ellery. "Anyway, I saw Jake and the butler whisperin' on the sly. And they planned to meet down at the lodge with the others. I think that dago chauffeur was one. But I foiled 'em. I followed Jake when he sneaked into the lodge house and locked him in. Then I wrote to the chief detective at Headquarters and they sent out this sleuth to help me round 'em up." He finishes by wavin' at me triumphant.

And you might know that would get a chuckle out of Mr. Robert. "Oh, yes!" says he. "Detective Sergeant Torchy!"

Meanwhile Andres Zosco is starin' from one to the other of us and scratchin' his head puzzled. "I can't get a word of sense out of it all," says he. "Not a word. Jake, let's hear from you. Where have you been since night before last after dinner?"

Jake pries himself loose from the billowy embrace and advances sheepish. "Why—why," says he, "I was locked in that fool lodge house."

"You were, eh?" says Zosco. "But how did that happen? What did you go in there for?"

"Aw, if you must know, Andy, it—it was pinochle," he growls. "It ain't a crime, is it, a little game?"

"What about the butler, though, and the others?" insists Zosco.

"Why," says Jake, "they was goin' to be in it, too. Can't play pinochle alone, can you? And in a place like this where there's nothing goin' on but silly billiards, or that bridge auction, a feller's gotta find some amusement, ain't he? Saginaw they comes to the house 'most every night—Hoffmeyer and Raditz and——"

"Yes, I know," breaks in Zosco. "So that was the plot, was it, Ellery?"

Ellery registers scorn. "Huh!" says he. "Don't let him put over any such fish tale on you. Ask him about the slow poison in Maggie's coffee, and stealin' the jewels, and—and all the rest."

“Why, Ellery!” gasps Mrs. Zosco.

“Didn’t I catch you sniffin’?” demands Ellery. “And ain’t you been mopin’ around?”

“Oh!” says she. “But that was before Andy had promised to let me play the lead in his new eight-reel feature, ‘The Singed Moth.’ I’ve been chipper enough since, haven’t I, Andy, dear?”

“Slow poison!” echoes Zosco. “Jewel stealing! Murder plots! Boy, where did you get such stuff in your head?”

But Ellery can only drop his chin and scrape his toe.

“I expect I can clear up that mystery,” says I. “As a movie fan Ellery is an ace.”

And then it was Zosco’s turn to stare. I don’t know whether it got clear home to him then or not. He was just about to separate himself from some remark on the subject when Mrs. Jake cut loose with another squeal.

“Why, Jake Zosco!” says she. “Look at you! Like a tramp you are.”

“Well, why not?” says Jake. “Didn’t I sleep last night in a wheelbarrow?”

And when the folks you’re callin’ on get to droppin’ into intimate personal remarks like that it’s time to back out graceful. I guess even Mrs. Robert decides this wasn’t just the evenin’ to play the pipe organ. Before we’d got out they’d opened up the subject of what to do with young Ellery Bean and the prospects

were that he was due for a quick return to Shelby, N. C.

“I don’t see what good that’s going to do,” says Vee. “I should say that he needed some kind of mental treatment. Why, his poor foolish head seems to be filled with nothing but crime and crooks. I don’t understand how he could get that way.”

“You would,” says I, “if you’d take a full course of Zosco films.”

CHAPTER XIII

TORCHY STRAYS FROM BROADWAY

"I MUST say it listens kind of complicated," says I, after Vee has explained how I am to arrive at this country house weddin' fest.

"Why, Torchy, it's perfectly simple," says she.

And once more she sketches out the plan, how I'm to take the express to Springfield, catch a green line trolley that's bound northwest, get off at Dorr's Crossing, and wait until this Barry Crane party picks me up in his car.

You see this friend of Vee's who's billed for the blushin' bride act has decided to have the event pulled off at Birch Crest, the family's summer home up in the hills of old N. H. Vee has promised to motor up the day before with the bridesmaid, leavin' me to follow the next mornin'. But when we come to look up train schedules it develops that the only way to get to Birch Crest by train is via Boston.

"How about runnin' up to Montreal and droppin' down?" I suggests sarcastic.

And then comes the word that this organist guy will be on his way up across lots, after an over-night stop in New Haven, and will take

me aboard if I can make the proper connection.

"Suppose I make a slip, though?" says I. "There I'll be stranded up in the pie belt with nothing but my feet to ride fifty miles on. Sorry, Vee, but I guess your old boardin' school chum will have to break into matrimony without my help."

Maybe you think that settled it. If you do you ain't tried being married. Inside of half an hour we'd agreed on the usual compromise—I'm to do as Vee says.

So here at 11:15 on a bright summer mornin' I'm dumped off a trolley car way out on the upper edge of Massachusetts. It's about as lonesome a spot as you could find on the map. Nothing but fields and woods in sight, and a dusty road windin' across the right of way. Not a house to be seen, not even a barn.

"You're sure this is Dorr's Crossin', eh?" I asks of the conductor as I hesitates on the step.

"Oh, yes," says he, cheerful.

"Don't seem to be usin' it much, does he?" says I.

"Ding, ding!" remarks the fare collector to the motorman, and it was a case of hoppin' lively for me.

There's nothing left to do but hoist myself conspicuous onto a convenient wayside rock and hope that this Barry Crane person was runnin'

somewhere near on time. About then I begun to wish I knew more about him, his general habits and so on. Was his memory good? Could he be depended on to keep dates with strangers? Would he know Dorr's Crossing when he saw it?

Veë hadn't touched on any of these points when she was convincin' me how simple it would be for him and me to get together. Course, she'd given me a chatty little sketch of Mr. Crane, but mostly it had been about what a swell organist he was. Played in a big church. Not only that, but made up pieces, all out of his own head. Also she'd mentioned about his hopeless romance with a certain Ann McLeod.

Seems Barry had been strong for Miss McLeod for five or six years. She'd kind of strung him along at first, too. Couldn't help likin' Barry some. Everybody did. He was that kind—good natured, always sayin' clever things. You know. But when it came to hitchin' up with him permanent, Miss McLeod had balked. Nobody knew just why. Bright girl, Ann. Brainy, too, and with lots of pep. She was secretary for some big efficiency expert. Maybe that was why she couldn't stand for Barry's musical temperament. She thought 9 a.m. was absolutely the last call for pushin' back the rolltop and openin' the mornin' mail, while Barry's idea of beginnin'

a perfect day was for someone to bring in a breakfast tray about eleven o'clock and hand him a cigarette before he tumbled out of the straw. So while he'd qualified as a Dear Old Thing and she'd got to the point where she'd let him call her Playmate Mine, that's where the romance hung on the rocks. Also he'd been described as a chunky party with a round face decorated with a cute little mustache and baby blue eyes.

All of which don't help me dope out how long I'm due to lend a human note to an otherwise empty landscape. And there's more excitin' outdoor sports than sittin' on a rock waitin' to be rescued by someone who hasn't even seen a snapshot of you. I'll tell the world that. During the first twenty minutes I answered two false alarms. One was a gasoline truck going the wrong way and the other turns out to be an R.F.D. flivver with a baby's go-cart tied on the side. It was good and hot on the perch I'd picked out and I could feel the sun doing things to the back of my neck and ears, but I didn't dare climb down for fear I'd be missed.

Where was this musical gent and his tourin' car? Or would it be a limousine? Somehow from the way Vee had talked, sayin' he was bugs on motorin', I sort of favored the limousine proposition. Uh-huh. Most likely one lined with cretonne, and a French chauffeur at the wheel. But nothing like that was rollin'

past Dorr's Crossing. Not while I was watchin'.

The rock wasn't gettin' a bit softer, either. Once a bluejay balanced himself on a nearby bush and after lookin' me over curious screeched himself hoarse tryin' to say what he thought of a city guy who didn't know enough to get in the shade. It got to be noon. Still no Barry Crane. I was just wonderin' when that trolley car was due for a return trip and was workin' up a few cuttin' remarks to hand Vee when I got her on the long distance, when I hears something approachin' from down the road. First off I thought it might be one of these hay mowers runnin' wild, but pretty soon out of a cloud of dust jumps a little roadster. It sure was humpin' itself and makin' as much noise about it as a Third Avenue surface car with two flat wheels. Didn't look very promisin' but I got up and stretched my neck until I saw there was two people in it. Next thing I knew though one of 'em, a young lady, is motionin' to me, and with a squeal of brake bands the little car pulls up opposite the rock. And sure enough the young gent drivin' has a sketchy mustache and baby blue eyes.

"What ho!" he sings out cheerful. "Torchy, isn't it? Sorry if we've kept you waiting, but Adelbaran wasn't performing quite as well as usual this morning. Stow your bag on the fender and climb in."

"In where?" says I, glancin' at the single seat.

"Oh, really there's plenty of room for three," says the young lady. "And for fear Barry will forget to mention it, I am Miss McLeod. He persuaded me at the last minute to come with him in this crazy machine."

"Oh, I say, Ann!" protests Barry. "Not so rough, please. You've no notion how sensitive Adelbaran is to unkind criticism. Besides, he's brought us safely so far, hasn't he?"

Ann shrugs her shoulders and moves over to make room for me. "If you can make another fifty miles in it I shall almost believe in miracles," says she.

"And in me too, I trust," says Barry. "Hearest thou, Adelbaran? Then on, on, pride of the desert! The women are singing in the tents and—and all that sort of thing. Ho, ho! for the roaring road!"

He's some classy little driver, Barry. Inside of a hundred yards he has her doin' better than twenty-six on an up grade over a dirt road sprinkled free with rocks and waterbreaks. Slam bang, bumpety-bump, ding-dong we go, with more jingles and squeaks and rattles than a junk cart rollin' off a roof.

"Don't mind a few little noises," says Miss McLeod. "Barry doesn't. A loose fender or a worn roller bearing means nothing to him. Why, he started with a cracked spark-plug that

was spitting like a tom-cat, the carburetor popping from too lean a mixture, and a half filled radiator boiling away merrily. It was stopping to get those things fixed up, and having some air pumped into the spare tire, that made us so late."

"You see!" says Barry. "She admits it. Wonderful girl though, Ann. She can tell at a glance just what's the matter with anything or anyone. Take me, for instance; she——"

"Sharp curve ahead, Barry," breaks in Ann.

"Right-o!" says he, takin' it on two wheels and then stepping on the gas button to rush a hill.

"Lucky we're wedged in tight," says I, "or some of us might be spilled out."

"Yes," says Miss McLeod, "and Barry never would miss us."

"Cruel words!" says Barry. "How often have I said, Ann, that I miss you every hour?"

"He's off again," says Ann. "But if you must be sentimental, Barry, I shall insist on doing the driving myself."

"Squelched!" says Barry. "I'll be good."

Say, they made a great team, them two, when it came to exchangin' persiflage. It was snappy stuff and it helped a lot towards taking my mind off Barry's jazz-style drivin'. For he sure does bear down heavy with his foot. If he plays the organ the way he runs a car I should think he'd raise the roof. And the speed

he gets out of that dinky little roadster is amazin'. Might have been all right on smooth macadam, but on this country road he had her jumpin' around on that short wheel-base like a jackrabbit with the itch. We might have been so many kernels of pop-corn being shaken over a hot fire. Barry seems to be enjoyin' every minute of it, though. He makes funny cracks, whistles, and now and then breaks into song.

"Driving a car seems to go to his head," remarks Miss McLeod. "It appears to make him wild."

"It does," says Barry. "For——

I'm a wild prairie flower,
I grow wilder hour by hour.
Nobody cares to cultivate me,
I'm wild. Whe-e-e-e!"

He warbles that for the next five minutes, until Miss McLeod suggests that it's time for lunch.

"Let's stop at the next shady place we come to," says she.

"Oh, bother!" says Barry. "Just when Adelbaran is striking his best pace. Why not take our nourishment on the fly?"

So she gets out the sandwiches and the thermos bottle and we take it that way. Rather than let Barry take either hand off the wheel she feeds him herself, even if he does complain about gettin' his countenance smeared up with

mustard some. Anyway, we didn't lose any time if we did spill more or less of the coffee.

"Cheerie oh!" sings out Barry, readin' a sign board. "Only twenty miles more!"

"But such up-and-downy miles!" says Ann.

She was dead right about that, for the further we got into New Hampshire the more the road looked like it had been built by a roller coaster fan. I always had a notion this was a small state, from the way it looks on the map, but I'll bet if it could be rolled flat once it would spread out near as big as Texas. All we did was to climb up and up and then slide down and down. Generally at the bottom was one of these covered wooden bridges, like a hay barn with both ends knocked out, and the way we'd roar through those was enough to make you think you was goin' forward with a barrage. Then just ahead would be another long hill windin' up to the top of the world.

"Only five miles to go!" sings out Barry at last, along about three o'clock. "Now, Ann, it's nearly time for you to be saying a few kind words to Adelbaran and me."

"I'll be thinking them up," says Ann.

Perhaps she did. I can't say. For it was somewhere in the middle of the second or third hill after this that the little roadster began to splutter and cough like it had swallowed a monkey wrench.

"Come, come now, Adelbaran!" says Barry

coaxin'. "Don't go misbehaving at this late hour. Remember the women singing in the tents, the palm waving over the——"

"Barry," says Ann, "something has gone wrong with your engine."

"Say not so," says Barry, steppin' on the accelerator careless.

"But I'm sure!" says Ann. "There!"

With a final cough the thing has quit cold. All Barry can seem to do though is to jiggle the spark and look surprised. "Why—why, that's odd!" says he.

"Yes, but sitting here isn't going to help," says Miss McLeod. "Get out and see what's happened. Come on."

And while she's liftin' the hood and pawin' around among the wires and things, with Barry lookin' on puzzled and helpless, I sort of wanders about inspectin' Adelbaran curious. It's some relic, all right, and my guess is that it was assembled by a cross-eyed mechanic from choice pieces he rescued off'm a scrap heap. All of a sudden I notices something peculiar.

"Say, folks," I calls out, "where's the gas tank on this chariot?"

"Why, it's on the back," says Barry.

"Well, it ain't now," says I. "It's gone."

"Gone!" echoes Ann. "The gas tank? Oh, that can't be possible."

"Take a look," says I.

And sure enough, when they comes around

all they can find is the rusted straps that held it in place and the feed pipe twisted off short.

“Ha, ha!” says Barry. “How utterly absurd. I’ve rattled off a lot of things before, but never the gas tank. And I suppose that’s rather important to have.”

“Quite,” says Ann. “One doesn’t go motor-ing nowadays without one.”

“But—but what’s to be done?” says Barry. “I simply must get to Birch Crest in time to play the wedding march. The ceremony is to be at 4:30, you know, and here we are——”

“I should say,” breaks in Ann, “that we’d better find that tank and see if we can’t screw it on or something. It can’t be far behind, of course.”

That seemed sensible enough. So we spreads out across the road and goes scoutin’ down the hill. Didn’t seem likely a thing as big as that could hide itself completely, even if it had bounced off into the bushes. But we got clear to the bottom without findin’ so much as its track. On we goes, pawin’ through the bushes, scoutin’ the ditches on both sides, and peekin’ behind trees.

“Come, little tankey, come to your master,” calls Barry persuasive. Then he tries whistlin’ for it.

“Well, we’re sure to find it somewhere down that next hill,” says Ann. “Probably near that

water-break where you gave us such a hard jolt."

But we didn't. In fact, we scouted back over the road for nearly a mile with no signs of the bloomin' thing.

"Then we've missed it," finally decides Ann. "Of course no car could run this far without gas."

"You don't know Adelbaran," says Barry. "He's quite used to running without things. I've trained him to do it."

"Barry, this is no time to be funny," says she. "Now you take the left side going back. I'll bet you overlooked it."

Well, we made a regular drag-net on the return trip, scourin' the bushes for twenty feet on either side, but no tank turns up.

"Looks like we were stranded," says I, as we fetches up at the roadster once more.

Miss Ann McLeod though, ain't one to give up easy. Besides, she's had all that efficiency trainin'.

"I don't suppose you carry such a thing as an emergency can of gasoline anywhere in the car?" she asks Barry.

"I'm sure I don't know," says he. "The fellow in the garage insisted on selling me a lot of stuff once. It's all stowed under the seat."

"Let's see," says she, liftin' out the cushion. "Why yes, here it is—a whole quart. And a

little funnel, too. Now if we could pour enough into the feed pipe to fill the carburetor——”

It was a grand little scheme, only the funnel end was too big to fit into the feed pipe.

“Any tire tape?” demands Ann.

Barry thought there was, but we couldn’t find it. Then he remembered he’d used it to wrap the handle of his tennis racquet once.

“I got some gum,” says I.

“The very thing!” says Ann. “It must be chewed first though. Here, Barry, take two or three pieces.”

“But I don’t care for gum,” says Barry. “Really!”

“If you don’t wish to spend the night here, chew—and chew fast,” says Ann.

So he chewed. We all chewed. And with the three fresh gobs Ann did a first aid plumbin’ job that didn’t look so worse. She got the funnel so it would stick on the pipe.

“But it must be held there,” she announces. “I’ll tell you, Barry; you will have to hang out over the back and keep the funnel in place with one hand and pour in the gas with the other, while I drive.”

“Oh, I say!” says Barry. “I’d look nice, wouldn’t I?”

“Torchy will hold you by the legs to keep you from falling off,” she goes on. “Come, unbutton the back curtain and roll it up. There! Now out you go. And don’t spill a drop, mind.”

It sure was an ingenious way of feedin' gas to an engine, and I had my doubts about whether it would work or not. But it does. First thing I knew we'd started off with a roar and were tearin' up the hill on second. We made the top, too.

"Now hold tight and save the gas," sings out Ann. "I'm going to coast down this one full tilt."

Which she does. Barry bounces around a lot on his elbows and stomach, but I had a firm grip on his legs and we didn't lose him off.

"More gas now!" calls Ann as we hits the bottom.

"Ouch! My tummy!" groans Barry.

"Never mind," says Ann. "Only three miles more."

Say, it was the weirdest automobilin' I ever did, but Ann ran with everything wide open and we sure were coverin' the distance. Once we passed a big tourin' car full of young folks and as we went by they caught sight of Barry, actin' as substitute gas tank, and they all turned to give him the haw-haw.

"Probably they—they think I—I'm doing this on a bub-bet," says Barry. "I—I wish I were. I—I'd pay."

"Store ahead!" announces Ann. "Perhaps we can get some more gas."

It was a good guess. We fills the can and starts on again, with less than two miles to go.

I think Barry must have been a bit reckless with that last quart for we hadn't gone more'n a mile before the engine begins to choke and splutter. We were almost to the top of a hill, too.

"Gas all gone," says Barry, tryin' to climb back in.

"Go back!" says Ann. "Take the funnel off and blow in the feed pipe. There! That's it. Keep on blowing."

You couldn't beat Ann. The machine takes a fresh spurt, we makes the top of the hill, and halfway down the other side we sees Birch Crest. Hanged if we don't roll right up to the front door too, before the engine gives its last gasp, and Barry, covered with dust and red in the face, is hauled in. We're only half an hour late, at that.

Course, the whole weddin' party is out there to see our swell finish. They'd been watchin' for us this last hour, wonderin' what had happened, and now they crowds around to ask Barry why he arrives hangin' over the back that way. And you should have heard 'em roar when they gets the explanation.

"See!" says Barry on the side to Ann. "I told you folks would laugh at me."

"Poor boy!" says Miss McLeod, hookin' her arm into his. "Don't mind. I think you were perfectly splendid about it."

"By Jove, though! Do you?" says he.

"Would—would you risk another ride with me, Ann? I know Adelbaran didn't show up very well but——"

"But your disposition did," cuts in Ann. "And if you're going to insist on driving around the country in such a rattle-trap machine I—I think I'd better be with you—always."

And say, I don't think I ever heard so much pep thrown into the weddin' march as when Barry Crane pumps it out that afternoon. He's wearin' a broad grin, too.

Soon as I has a chance I whispers the news to Vee. "Really?" says she. "Isn't that fine! And I must say Barry is a lucky chap."

"Well, he's some whizz himself," says I. "Bound to be or else he couldn't run a car a mile and a half just on his breath."

CHAPTER XIV

SUBBING FOR THE BOSS

How's that? Has something happened to me? Course there has. Something generally does, and if I ever get to the point where it don't I hope I shall have pep enough left to use the self-starter. Uh-huh. That's the way I give the hail to a new day—grinnin' and curious.

Now some folks I know of works it just opposite, and they may be right, too. Mr. Piddie, our office manager, for instance. He's always afraid something will happen to him. I've heard him talk about it enough. Not just accidents that might leave him an ambulance case, or worse, but anything that don't come in his reg'lar routine; little things, like forgettin' his commutation ticket, or gettin' lost in Brooklyn, or havin' his new straw lid blow under a truck and walkin' bareheaded a few blocks. Say, I'll bet he won't like it in Heaven if he can't punch a time card every mornin', or if they shift him around much to different harp sections.

While me, I ain't worryin' what tomorrow will be like if it's only some different from yesterday. And generally it is. Take this last little whirl of mine. I'll admit it leaves me a

bit dizzy in the head, like I'd been side-swiped by a passing event. Also my pride had had a bump when I didn't know I had such a thing. Maybe that's why I look so dazed.

What led up to it all was a little squint into the past that me and Old Hickory indulged in here a week or so back. I'd been openin' the mornin' mail, speedy and casual as a first-class private sec. ought to do, and sortin' it into the baskets, when I runs across this note which should have been marked "Personal." I'd only glanced at the "Dear old pal" start and the "Yours to a finish, Bonnie," endin' when I lugs it into the private office.

"I expect this must have been meant for Mr. Robert; eh, Mr. Ellins?" says I, handin' it over.

It's written sort of scrawly and foreign on swell stationery and Old Hickory don't get many of that kind, as you can guess. He reads it clear through, though, without even a grunt. Then he waves me into a chair.

"As it happens, Torchy," says he, "this was meant for no one but me."

"My error," says I. "I didn't read it, though."

He don't seem to take much notice of that statement, just sits there gazin' vacant at the wall and fingerin' his cigar. After a minute or so of this he remarks, sort of to himself: "Bonnie, eh? Well, well!"

I might have smiled. Probably I did, for the last person in the world you'd look for anything like mushy sentiments from would be Old Hickory Ellins. Couldn't have been much more than a flicker of a smile at that. But them keen old eyes of his don't miss much that's going on, even when he seems to be in a trance. He turns quick and gives me one of them quizzin' stares.

"Funny, isn't it, son," says he, "that I should still be called Dear Old Pal by the most fascinating woman in the world?"

"Oh, I don't know," says I, tryin' to pull the diplomatic stuff.

"You young rascal!" says he. "Think I'm no judge, eh? Here! Wait a moment. Now let's see. Um-m-m-m!"

He's pullin' out first one desk drawer and then another. Finally he digs out a faded leather photograph case and opens it.

"There!" he goes on. "That's Bonnie Sutton. What about her?"

Course, her hair is done kind of odd and old-fashioned, piled up on top of her head that way, with a curl or two behind one ear; and I expect if much of her costume had showed it would have looked old-fashioned, too. But there wasn't much to show, for it's only a bust view and cut off about where the dress begins. Besides, she's leanin' forward on her elbows. A fairly plump party, I should judge, with substantial, well-rounded shoulders and kind of a

big face. Something of a cut-up, too, I should say, for she holds her head a little on one side, her chin propped in the palm of the left hand, while between the fingers of the right she's holdin' a cigarette. What struck me most, though, was the folksy look in them wide-open eyes of hers. If it hadn't been for that I might have sized her up for a lady vamp.

"Good deal of a stunner, I should say, Mr. Ellins," says I; "and no half portion, at that."

"Of queenly stature, as the society reporters used to put it," says Old Hickory. "She had her court, too, even if some of the sessions were rather lively ones."

At that he trails off into what passes with him as a chuckle and I waits patient while he does a mental review of old stuff. I could guess near enough how some of them scenes would show up: the bunch gatherin' in one of the little banquet rooms upstairs at Del's., and Bonnie surrounded three deep by admirin' males, perhaps kiddin' Ward McAllister over one shoulder and Freddie Gebhard whisperin' over the other; or after attendin' one of Patti's farewell concerts there would be a beefsteak and champagne supper somewhere uptown—above Twenty-third Street—and some wild sport would pull that act of drinking Bonnie's health out of her slipper. You know? 'And I expect they printed her picture on the

front page of the "Clipper" when she broke into private theatricals.

"And she's still on deck?" I suggests.

Old Hickory nods. He goes on to say how the last he heard of her she'd married some rich South American that she'd met in Washington and gone off to live in Brazil, or the Argentine. That had been quite a spell back, I take it. He didn't say just how long ago. Anyway, she'd dropped out for good, he'd supposed.

"And now," says he, "she has returned, a widow, to settle on the old farm, up somewhere near Cooperstown. It appears, however, that she finds it rather dull. I can't fancy Bonnie on a farm somehow. Anyway, she has half a mind, she says, to try New York once more before she finally decides. Wants to see some of the old places again. And by the great cats, she shall! No matter what my fool doctors say, Torch, I mean to take a night or two off when she comes. If Bonnie can stand it I guess I can, too."

"Yes, sir," says I, grinnin' sympathetic.

Well, that was 1:15 a.m. And at exactly 2:30 he limps out with his hand to his right side and his face the color of cigar ashes. He's in for another spell. I gets his heart specialist on the 'phone and loads Mr. Ellins into a taxi. Just before closin' time he calls up from the house to say that he's off to the sanitarium for another treatment and may be gone a couple of

weeks. I must tell Mr. Robert about those options, have him sub. in at the next directors' meetin', and do a lot of odd jobs that he'd left unfinished.

"And by the way, Torchy," he winds up, "about Bonnie."

"Oh, yes," says I. "The lady fascinator."

"If she should show up while I am away," says Old Hickory, "don't—don't bother to tell her I'm a sick old man. Just say I—I've been called out of town, or something."

"I get you," says I. "Business trip."

"She'll be disappointed, I suppose," goes on Mr. Ellins. "No one to take her around town. That is, unless—By George, Torchy!—You must take my place."

"Eh?" says I, gaspy.

"Yes," says he. "You lucky young rascal! You shall be the one to welcome Bonnie back to New York. And do it right, son. Draw on Mr. Piddie for any amount you may need. Nothing but the best for Bonnie. You understand. That is, if she comes before I get back."

Say, I've had some odd assignments from Old Hickory, but never one just like this before. Some contract that, to take an ex-home wrecker in tow and give her the kind of a good time that was popular in the days of Berry Wall. If I could only dig up some old sport with a good memory he might coach me so that I might make a stab at it, but I didn't know where to find one.

And for three days there I made nervous motions every time Vincent came in off the gate with a card.

But a week went by and no Bonnie blew in from up state. Maybe she'd renigged on the proposition, or had hunted up some other friend of the old days. Anyway, I'd got my nerves soothed down considerable and was almost countin' the incident as closed, when here the other day as I drifts back from lunch Vincent holds me up.

"Lady to see Mr. Ellins," says he. "She's in the private office."

"Sad words, Vincent," says I. "Don't tell me it's Bonnie."

"Nothing like that," says he. "Here's her name," and he hands me a black-bordered card.

"Huh!" says I, taking a glance. "Señora Concita Maria y Polanio. All of that, eh? Must be some whale of a female?"

"Whale is near it," says Vincent. "You ought to see her."

"The worst of it is," says I, "I gotta see her."

He's no exaggerator, Vincent. This female party that I finds bulgin' Old Hickory's swing desk chair has got any Jonah fish I ever saw pictured out lookin' like a pickerel. I don't mean she's any side-show freak. Not as bad as that. But for her height, which is about medium, I should say, she sure is bulky. The

way she sits there with her skirts spreadin' wide around her feet, she has all the graceful outlines of a human water tower. Above the wide shoulders is a big, high-colored face, and wabblin' kind of unsteady on top of her head is a black velvet hat with jet decorations. You remember them pictures we used to see of the late Queen Victoria? Well, the Señora is an enlarged edition.

I was wonderin' how long since she came up from Cuba, and if I'd need a Spanish interpreter to find out why she thinks she has to call on the president of the Corrugated Trust, when she rolls them big dark eyes of hers my way and remarks, in perfectly good United States: "Ah! A ray of sunshine!"

It comes out so unexpected that for a second or so I just gawps at her, and then I asks: "Referrin' to my hair?"

"Forgive me, young man," says she. "But it is such a cheerful shade."

"Yes'm," says I. "So I've been told. Some call it fire-hydrant red, but I claim it's only super-pink."

"Anyway, I like it very much," says she. "I hope they don't call you Reddy, though?"

"No, ma'am," says I. "Torchy."

"Why, how clever!" says she. "May I call you that, too? And I suppose you are one of Mr. Ellins' assistants?"

"His private secretary," says I. "So you

can see what luck he's playin' in. Did you want to talk to him 'special, or is it anything I can fix up for you?"

"It's rather personal, I'm afraid," says she. "The boy at the door insisted that Mr. Ellins wasn't in, but I told him I didn't mind waiting."

"That's nice," says I. "He'll be back in a week or so."

"Oh!" says she. "Then he went away before my note came?"

Which was where I begun to work up a hunch. Course, it's only a wild suspicion at first. She don't fit the description at all. Still, if she should be the one—I could feel the panicky shivers chasin' up and down my backbone just at the thought. I expect my voice wavered a little as I put the question.

"Say," says I, "you don't happen to be Bonnie Sutton, do you?"

That got a laugh out of her. It's no throaty, old-hen cackle, either. It's clear and trilly.

"Thank you, Torchy," says she. "You've guessed it. But please tell me how?"

"Why," says I, draggy, "I—er—you see——" And then I'm struck with this foolish idea. Honest, I couldn't help pullin' it. "Mr. Ellins," I goes on, "happened to show me your picture."

"What!" says she. "My picture? I—I can hardly believe it."

"Wait," says I. "It's right here in the drawer. That is, it was. Yep! This one. There!"

And say, as I flashed that old photo on her I didn't have the nerve to watch her face. You get me, don't you? If you'd changed as much as she had how would you like to be stacked up sudden against a view of what you was once? So I looked the other way. Must have been a minute or more before I glanced around again. She was still starin' at the picture and brushin' something off her eyelashes.

"Torchy," says she, "I could almost hug you for that. What a really talented young liar you are! And how thoroughly delightful of you to do it!"

"Oh, I don't know," says I. "Anyway, it's the picture he showed me when he was tellin' about you."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind, Torchy," she goes on, "telling me just what he said."

"Why, for one thing," says I, "he let out that you was the most fascinatin' woman in the world."

Another ripply laugh from Bonnie. "The old dear!" says she. "But then, he always was a little silly about me. Think of his never having gotten over it in all these years, though! But he didn't stay to meet me. How was that?"

I hope I made it convincin' about his being

called before a Senate Committee and how he was hoping to get back before she showed up. I told it as well as I could with them wise friendly eyes watchin' me.

"Perhaps, after all," says she, "it's just as well. If I had known he had this photo I never would have risked coming. Now that I'm here, however, I wish there was someone who——"

"Oh, he fixed that up," says I. "I'm the substitute."

"You!" says she. Then she shakes her head. "You're a dear boy," she goes on, "but I couldn't ask it of you. Really!"

"Sure you can," says I. "You want to see what the old town looks like, have a little dinner in one of the old joints, and maybe make a little round of the bright spots afterwards. Well, I got it all planned out. Course, I can't do it just the way Mr. Ellins would but——"

"Listen, Torchy," she breaks in. "I regret to admit the fact, but I am a fat, shapeless, freaky-looking old woman. Ordinarily that doesn't worry me in the least. After fifteen years in the tropics one doesn't worry about how one looks. It has been a long time since I've given it a thought. But now—Well, it's different. Seeing that picture. No, I can't ask it of you."

"Mr. Ellins will ask me, though, when he gets back," says I. "Besides, I don't mind. Maybe you are a little overweight, but I'm be-

ginnin' to suspect you're a reg'lar person, after all; and if I can qualify as a guide——"

Say, don't let on to Vee, but that's where I got hugged. It seems Bonnie does want to have one glimpse of New York with the lights on; wants it the worst way. For when she'd come up from Rio her one idea was to get back to the old farm, fix it up regardless of expense, and camp down there quiet for the rest of her days. She'd had a bully time doin' it, too, for three or four months. She'd enjoyed havin' people around her who could talk English, and watchin' the white clouds sail over the green hills, and seein' her cattle and sheep browsin' about the fields. It had rested her eyes and her soul.

And then, all of a sudden, she had this hunch that maybe she was missin' something. Not that she thought she could come back reg'lar, or break into the old life where she left off. She says she wasn't so foolish in the head as all that. Her notion was that she might be happier and more contented if she just looked on from the side-lines.

"I wanted to hear music," says she, "and see the lights, and watch gay and beautiful young people doing the things I used to do. It might—Well, it might shake off some of my years. Who knows?"

"Sure! That's the dope," says I. "Course, a lot of their old-time joints ain't runnin' now—Koster & Bial's, Harrigan's, the Café Martin—

but maybe some you remember are still open.”

“Silly!” says she, shakin’ a pudgy forefinger at me. “That isn’t what I want at all. Not the old, but the new; the very newest and most fashionable. I’m not trying to go back, but trying to keep up.”

“Oh!” says I. “In that case it’ll be easy. How about startin’ in with the tea dance at the Admiral, just opened? Begins at 4:15.”

“Tell me, Torchy,” says she, “did you ever see anyone as—as huge as I am at a tea dance? No, I think we’ll not start with that.”

“Then suppose we hop off with dinner on the Plutoria roof?” I suggests. “The Tortonis are doing a dancin’ turn there and they have the swellest jazz band in town.”

“It sounds exciting,” says Bonnie. “I will try to be ready by 7:30. And you surely are a nice boy. Now if you will help me out to the elevator——”

And it’s while I’m tryin’ to steady her on one side as she goes rollin’ waddly through the main office that I gets a little hint of what’s comin’ to me. Maybe you’ve seen a tug-boat bobbin’ alongside a big liner in a heavy sea. I expect we must have looked something like that. Even so, that flossy bunch of lady typists showed poor taste in cuttin’ loose with the smothered snickers as we wobbles past.

And I could get a picture of myself towin’ the Señora Concita Maria What’s-Her-Name,

alias Bonnie Sutton, through the Plutoria corridors. What if her feet should skid and after ten or a dozen bell hops had boosted her up again they should find me underneath? Still I was in for it. No scoutin' around for back-number restaurants, as I'd planned at first. No, Bonnie had asked to be brought up-to-date. So she should, too. But I did wish she'd come to town in something besides that late Queen Victoria costume.

Yet I maps out the evenin' as if I had a date with Peggy Hopkins or Hazel Dawn. At 5:30 I'm slippin' a ten-spot into the unwillin' palm of a Plutoria head waiter to cinch a table for two next to the dancin' surface, and from there I drops into a cigar store where I pays two prices for a couple of end seats at the Midnight Follies. Then I slicks up a bit at a Turkish bath and at 7:25 I'm waitin' with the biggest taxi I can find in front of Bonnie's hotel.

I expect I must have let out a sigh of relief when she shows up and I notice that she's shed the unsteady velvet lid. It's some creation she's swapped it for, a pink satin affair with a wing spread of about three feet, but I must admit it kind of sets off that big face of hers and the grayish hair.

That's nothing to the jolt I gets, though, after she's been loaded into the cab and the fur-trimmed opera cape slips back a bit. Say, take it from me, Bonnie has bloomed out. She must

have speeded up some Fifth Avenue modiste's establishment to the limit, but she's turned the trick, I'll say. Uh-huh! Not only the latest model evening gown, but she's had her hair done up spiffy, and she's got on a set of jewels that would make a pawnbroker's bride turn green.

"Z-z-zing!" says I, catchin' my breath. "Excuse me, but I didn't know you were going to dress the part."

"You didn't think I could, did you, Torchy?" says she. "Well, I haven't quite forgotten, you see."

So all them gloomy thoughts I'd indulged in was so much useless worry, as is usually the case. I'll admit we was some conspicuous dur-in' the evenin', with folks stretchin' their necks our way, but I didn't hear any snickers. They gazed at Bonnie sort of awed and impressed, like tourists starin' at the Woolworth Buildin' when it's lighted up.

Some classy dinner that was we had, even if I did order it myself, with only two waiters to coach me. I couldn't say exactly what it was we had for nourishment, only I know it was all tasty and expensive. You wouldn't expect me to pick out the cheap things for a lady plutess from Brazil, would you? So we dallies with Canaps Barbizon, Portage de la Reine, breasts of milk-fed pheasants, and such trifles as that. Bonnie says it's all good. But she can't seem

to get used to the band brayin' out impetuous just as she's about to take another bite of something.

"Tell me," says she, "is that supposed to be music?"

"Not at all," says I. "That's jazz. We've got so we can't eat without it, you know."

Also I suspect the Tortonis' dancin' act jarred her a bit. You've seen 'em do the shimmy-plus?

"Well!" says she, drawin' in a long breath and lookin' the other way. "So that is an example of modern dancing, is it?"

"It's the kind of stunt the tired business man has to have before he gets bright in the eyes again," says I. "But wait until we get to the Follies if you want to see him really begin to live."

We had to kill a couple of hours between times so we took in the last half of the latest bedroom farce and I think that got a rise or two out of Bonnie. I gathered from her remarks that Lillian Russell or Edna Wallace Hopper never went quite that far in her day.

"It's pajamas or nothing now," says I.

"And occasionally," she adds, "I suppose it is—Well, I trust not, at least."

After the Follies she hadn't a word to say. Only, as I landed her back at her hotel, along about 2:30 a.m., she slumps into a big chair in the Egyptian room and lets her chin sag.

"It's no use, Torchy," says she. "I—I couldn't."

"Eh?" says I.

"End my days to jazz time," says she. "No. I shall go back to my quiet hills and my calm-eyed Holsteins. And I shall go entirely contented. I can't tell you either, how thankful I am that it was you who showed me my mistake instead of my dear old friend. You've been so good about it, too."

"Me?" says I. "Why, I've had a big night. Honest."

"Bless you!" says she, pattin' my hand. "And just one thing more, Torchy. When you tell Mr. Ellins that I've been here, and gone, couldn't you somehow forget to say just how I looked? You see, if he remembers me as I was when that photo was taken—Well, where's the harm?"

"Trust me," says I. "And I won't be strainin' my conscience any at that."

But I didn't need to juggle even a word. When Old Hickory hears how I've subbed in for him with Bonnie he just pulls out the picture, gazes at it fond for a minute or so, and then remarks:

"Ah, you lucky young rascal!" Then he picks up a note from his desk. "Oh, by the way," he goes on, "here's a little remembrance she sent you in my care."

Little! Say, what do you guess? Oh, only

an order for a 1920 model roadster with white wire wheels to be delivered to me when I calls for it! She's merely tipped me an automobile, that's all. And after I'd read it through for the third time, and was sure it was so, I manages to gasp out:

“Lucky is right, Mr. Ellins; that's the only word.”

CHAPTER XV

A LATE HUNCH FOR LESTER

You might not guess it, but every now and then I connect with some true thought that makes me wiser above the ears. Honest, I do. Sometimes they just come to me by accident, on the fly, as it were. And then again, they don't come so easy.

Take this latest hunch of mine. I know now that my being a high-grade private sec. don't qualify me to hand out any fatherly advice to the female sex. Absolutely it doesn't. And yet, here only a few weeks back, that was just what I was doin'. Oh, I don't mean I was scatterin' it around broadcast. It had to be a particular and 'special case to tempt me to crash in with the Solomon stuff. It was the case of Lester Biggs—and little Miss Joyce.

Now you'd almost think I'd seen too many lady typists earnin' their daily bread and their weekly marcelle waves for me to get stirred up over anything they might do. And as a rule, I don't waste much thought on 'em unless they develop the habit of parkin' their gum on the corner of my desk, or some such trick as that. I sure would be busy if I did more, for here in

the Corrugated general offices we have fifteen or twenty more or less expert key pounders most of the time. Besides, it's Mr. Piddie's job to worry over 'em, and believe me he does it thorough.

But somehow this little Miss Joyce party was different. I expect it was the baby blue tam-o'-shanter that got me noticin' her first off. You know that style of lid ain't worn a great deal by our Broadway stenogs. Not the home crocheted kind. Hardly. I should judge that most of our flossy bunch wouldn't be satisfied until they'd swapped two weeks' salary for some Paris model up at Mme. Violette's. And how they did snicker when Miss Joyce first reported for duty wearin' that tam and costumed tacky in something a cross-roads dressmaker had done her worst on.

Miss Joyce didn't seem to mind. By rights she should have been a shy, modest little thing who would have been so cut up that she'd have rushed into the cloak room and spilled a quart of salt tears. But she never even quivers one of her long eyelashes, so Piddie reports. She just comes back at 'em with a sketchy, friendly little smile and proceeds to tackle her work business-like. And inside of ten days she has the lot of 'em eatin' out of her hand.

But while I might feel a little sympathetic toward this stray from the kerosene circuit I didn't let it go so far but what I kicked like a

steer when I finds that Piddie has wished her on me for a big forenoon's work.

"What's the idea, Piddie?" says I. "Why do I get one of your awkward squad who'll probably spell 'such' with a t in it and punctuate by the hit-or-miss method?"

"Miss Joyce?" says he, raisin' his eyebrows, pained. "I beg your pardon, Torchy, but she is one of our most efficient stenographers. Really!"

"She don't look the part," says I. "But if you say she is I'll take a chance."

Well, she was all he'd described. She could not only scribble down that Pitman stuff as fast as I could feed the dictation to her, but she could read it straight afterward and the letters she turns out are a joy to look over. From then on I picks her to do all my work, being careful not to let either Mr. Robert or Old Hickory know what an expert I've discovered in disguise.

For one thing she's such a quiet, inoffensive little party. She don't come in all scented with *Peau d'Espagne*, nor she don't stare at you bored, or pat her hair or polish her nails while you're waitin' to think of the right word. She don't seem to demand the usual chat or fish for an openin' to confide what a swell time she had last night. In fact, she don't make any remarks at all outside of the job in hand, which is some relief when you're scratchin' your head to think

what to tell the assistant Western manager about renewin' them dockage contracts.

Yet she ain't one of the scared-mouse kind. She looks you square in the eye when there's any call for it and she don't mumble her remarks when she has something to say. Not Miss Joyce. Her words come out clear and crisp, with a slight roll to the r's and all the final letters sounded, like she'd been taking elocution or something.

In the course of five or six weeks she has shed the blue tam for a neat little hat and has ditched the puckered seam effect dress for a black office costume with white collar and cuffs. She still sticks to partin' her hair in the middle and drawin' it back smooth with no ear tabs or waves to it. So she does look some old-fashioned.

That was why I'm kind of surprised to notice this Lester Biggs begin hoverin' around her at lunch time and toward the closin' hour. She ain't the type Lester usually picks out to roll his eyes at. Not in the least. For of all them young hicks in the bond room I expect Lester is about the most ambitious would-be sport we've got.

You see, I've known Lester Biggs more or less for quite some time. He started favorin' the Corrugated with his services back in the days when I was still on the gate and rated myself the highest paid and easiest worked office

boy between Greeley Square and Forty-second Street. And all the good I ever discovered about him wouldn't take me long to tell.

As for the other side of the case—Well, I ain't much on office scandal, but I will say that it always struck me Lester had the kind of a mind that needed chloride of lime on it. I never saw the time when he wasn't stretchin' his neck after some flossy typist or other, and as sure as a new one with the least hint of hair bleach showed up it would mean another affair for Lester. Maybe you know the kind.

And he sure dressed the part, on and off. The Tin-Horn Sport Cut clothes that you see advertised so wide must be made and designed 'special for Lester. I remember he sprung the first pinch-back coat that came into the office. Same way with the slit pockets, the belted vest and other cute little innovations that the Times Square chicken hounds drape themselves in.

I wouldn't quite say that he'd pass for the perfect male, either. Not unless you count the bat ears, face pimples, turkey neck and the cast in one eye as points of beauty. But that don't seem to bother Lester in the least. He knows he has a way with him. His reg'lar openin' is "Hello, Girlie, what you got on the event card for tonight?" and from that to makin' a date at Zinsheimer's dance hall is just a step. Oh, yes, Lester is some gay bird, if you want to call it that.

And all on twenty a week. So of course that interferes some with his great ambition. He used to tell me about it back in the old days when I was on the gate and hadn't sized him up accurate. Chorus girls! If he could only get to know some squab pippin from the Winter Garden or the Follies that would be all he'd ask. He would pick out his favorite from the new musical shows, lug around half-tone pictures of 'em cut from newspapers, and try to throw the bluff that he expected to meet 'em early next week; but as we all knew he never got nearer than the second balcony he never got away with the stuff.

"Suppose by some miracle you did, Lester?" I'd ask him. "What then? Would you blow her to a bowl of chow main at some chop suey joint, or could you get by with a nut sundae at a cut-rate drug store? And suppose some curb broker was waitin' to take her out to Heather Blossom Inn? You'd put up a hot competition, you would, with nothing but the change from a five left in your jeans."

"Ah, just leave that to me, old son," he'd say, winkin' devilish.

And the one time when he did pull it off I happened to hear about. A friend of his who was usher at the old Hippodrome offered to tow him to a little Sunday night supper at the flat of one of the chorus ladies. Lester went, too, and found a giddy thing of about forty fryin'

onions for a fam'ly of five, includin' three half-grown kids and a scene-shiftin' hubby.

That blow seems to discourage Lester for a week or so, since which he has run true to form. He'll run around with lady typists, or girls from the cloak department, or most anything that wears skirts, until they discover what a tight-wad he is and give him the shunt. But his great aim in life is to acquire a ladi-friend that he can point out in the second row and hang around for at the stage door about midnight.

So when I sees him flutterin' about Miss Joyce, and her making motions like she was fallin' for him, I didn't quite know what to make of it. Course, now that she's bucked up a bit on her costume she is more or less easy to look at. For a little thing, almost a half portion, as you might put it, she has quite a figure, slim and graceful. And them pansy brown eyes can light up sort of fascinatin', I expect. And being so fresh from the country I suppose she can't dope out what a cheap shimmy lizard Lester is. It's a wonder some of the other typists hadn't put her wise. They're usually good at that. But it looks like they'd missed a trick in her case, for one noon I overhears Lester datin' her up for an evenin' at Zinsheimer's. And when he drifts along I can't resist throwin' out a hint, on my own account.

"With Lester, eh?" says I, humpin' my eyebrows.

"Oh, I know," says Miss Joyce. "But I do love to dance and I—I've been rather lonely, you see."

I saw. And of course after that there was nothing more to say. She didn't tell me as much, but I understand that it got to be a regular thing. You could tell that by the intimate way Lester tips her the wink as he swaggers by. He didn't take any pains to hide it, or to lower his voice when he remarks, "Well, kiddo, see you at eight thirt., eh?"

As long as she kept her work up to the mark, which she does, it wasn't any funeral of mine. I never have yearned to be a volunteer chaperon. But I was kind of sorry for little Miss Joyce. I expect I said something of the kind to Vee, and she was all for having Mr. Piddie give her a good talking to.

"No use," says I. "Piddie wouldn't know how. All he can do is hire 'em and fire 'em, and even that's turnin' his hair gray. It'll all work out one way or another, I expect."

It does, too. But not exactly along the lines I was looking for it to develop. First off, Lester quits the Corrugated. As he'd been on the same job for more'n six years, and gettin' worse at it right along, the blow didn't quite put us out of business. We're still staggerin' ahead.

"What's the scheme, Lester?" says I. "Beatin' the office manager to it?"

“Huh!” says Lester. “I’ve been plannin’ to make a shift for more’n a year. Just waitin’ for the right openin’. I got it now.”

“The Morgan people sent for you, did they?” says I.

“They might have, at that,” says Lester, “only I’m through bein’ an office slave for anybody. I’m goin’ in with some live wires this time, where I’ll have a chance.”

But it turns out that he’s been taken on as a sidewalk man by a pair of ticket speculators—Izzy Goldman and his pal, who used to run the cigar stand down in the arcade. They handled any kind of pasteboards, from grandstand parade tickets to orchestra seats.

“Yes,” says I, “that’ll be a great career. Almost in the theatrical game, eh? You’ll be knowin’ all the pippins now, I expect.”

“Watch me,” says Lester.

Well, I didn’t strain my eyes. I’d have been just as pleased to know that Lester was going to slip out of my young life forever and to forget him complete within the next two days. Only I couldn’t. There was Miss Joyce to remind me. Not that she says a word. She ain’t the chatty, confidential kind. But it was natural for me to wonder now and then if they was still as chummy as at the start.

He’d been away a month or more I expect, before either of us passed his name, and then it came out accidental. I starts dictatin’ a let-

ter to a firm in St. Louis, Lester & Riggs. The name sort of startles Miss Joyce.

"I beg pardon?" says she, her pencil poised over the pad.

"No, not Lester Biggs," says I. "By the way, how is he these days?"

"I'm sure I don't know," says she. "I—I haven't seen him for weeks."

"Oh!" says I. "Kind of thought you'd be droppin' him down the coal shute or something."

She shrugs her shoulders and shakes her head. "It was he who dropped me," says she. "Flat."

"Considerin' Lester," says I, "that's more or less of a compliment."

"I am not so sure of that," says Miss Joyce. "You see, he was quite frank about it. He—he said I had no style or zipp about me. Well, I'm afraid it's true."

"Even so," says I, "it was sweet of him to throw it at you, wasn't it?"

She indulges in a sketchy, quizzin' smile. "I think some of the girls at Zinsheimer's had been teasing him about me," she goes on. "They called me 'the poor little working girl,' I believe. I've no doubt I looked it. But I haven't been able to spend much for clothes—as yet."

"Of course," says I, throwin' up a picture of an invalid mother and a coon-huntin' father back in the alfalfa somewhere. "And so far

you ain't missed much by not havin' 'em. I should put Lester's loss down on the credit side if I was makin' the entry."

"He could dance, though," says Miss Joyce, as she gets busy with her pencil again.

Then a few weeks later I was handed my big jolt. We was gettin' out a special report for the directors' meetin' one day after lunch when right in the middle of a table of costs Miss Joyce glances anxious at the clock and drops her note book.

"I'm so sorry," says she, "but couldn't we finish this tomorrow morning?"

"Why, I suppose we might," says I, "if it's anything important."

"It is," says she. "If I'm not there by 3 o'clock the stage manager will not see me at all, and I do so want to land an engagement this time."

"Eh?" says I gawpin'. "Stage manager! You?"

"Why, yes," says she. "You see, I tried once before. I was almost taken on, too. They liked my voice, they said, but I wasn't up on my dancing. So I've been taking lessons of a ballet master. Frightfully expensive. That's where all my money has gone. But I think they'll give me a chance this time. It's for the chorus of that new 'Tut! Tut! Marie' thing, you know, and they've advertised for fifty girls."

I suppose I must have let loose a gasp. This

meek, modest young thing, who looked like she wouldn't know a lip-stick from a boiled carrot, plannin' cold-blooded to throw up a nice respectable job and enter herself in the squab market! Why, I wouldn't have been jarred more if Piddie had announced that next season he was going to do bareback ridin' for some circus.

"Excuse me, Miss Joyce," says I, "but I wouldn't say you was just the kind they'd take on."

"Oh, they take all kinds," says she.

"Better brace yourself for a turndown, though," says I, "I see it coming to you. You ain't the type at all."

"Perhaps you don't know," says she, trippin' off to get her hat.

Ever see one of them mobs that turns out when there's a call for a new chorus? I've had to push my way through 'em once or twice up in some of them office buildings along the Rialto, and believe me, it's a wierd collection; all sorts, from wispy little flappers who should be in grammar school still, to hard-faced old battle axes who used to travel with Nat Goodwin. So I couldn't figure little Miss Joyce gettin' anything more'n a passing glance in that aggregation. Yet when she shows up in the mornin' she's lookin' sort of smilin' and chirky.

"Well," said I, "did you back out after lookin' 'em over?"

"Oh, no," says she. "I was tried out with the first lot and engaged right away. They're rushing the production, you see, and I happened to fit in. Why, inside of an hour they had twenty of us rehearsing. I'm to be in the first big number, I think—one of the Moonbeam girls. Isn't that splendid?"

"If that's what you want," says I, "I expect it is. But how about the folks back home? What'll they say to this wide jump of yours?"

"I've decided not to tell them anything about it," says she. "Not for a long time, anyway."

"They might hear, though," I suggests. "Just where do you come from?"

"Why, Saskatoun," says she, without battin' an eyelash.

"Oh, all right, if you don't want to tell," says I.

"But I have told you," says she. "Saskatoun."

"Is it a new hair tonic, or what?" says I.

"It's a city," says she. "One of the largest in British Columbia."

"Think of that!" says I. "They don't care how they mess up the map these days, do they? And your folks live there?"

"Most of them," says she. "Two of my brothers are up at Glen Bow, raising sheep; one of my sisters is at Alberta, giving piano lessons; and another sister is doing church singing in Moose Jaw. If I had stayed at home I

would be doing something like that. We are a musical family, you know. Daddy is a church organist and wanted me to keep on in the choir and perhaps get to be a soloist, at \$50 a month. But I couldn't see it. If I am going to make a living out of my music I want to make a good one. And New York is the place, isn't it?"

"It depends," says I. "You don't think you'll get rich in the 'Tut! Tut! Marie' chorus, do you?"

"Perhaps they'll not keep me in the chorus," says she. "It's the back door, I know, but it was the only way I could get in. And I'm going to work for something better. You'll see."

Yep, I saw. Miss Joyce resigned at the end of the week, and it wasn't ten days before I gets a little note from her saying how she'd been picked out to do a specialty dance and duet with Ronald Breen. Mr. Breen had done the picking himself. And she did hope I would look in some night when the company opened on Broadway.

"I expect we'll have to go; eh, Vee?" says I when I gets home.

"Surely," says Vee.

Well, maybe you've noticed what a hit this "Tut! Tut!" thing has been making. It's about the zippiest, peppiest girl show in town, and that's saying a lot. It's the kind of stuff that makes the tired business man get bright in the eyes and forget how near the sixteenth of January is. I thought first off we'd have to put

off seeing it until after Christmas, for when I finally got to the box office there was nothing doing in orchestra seats. Sold out five weeks in advance. But by luck I happens to run across Lester Biggs in the lobby and for five a throw he fixes me up with two places in G, middle row.

"It's a big winner," says he.

"Seen it yourself?" I asks.

"Not yet," says he. "Think I can pull it off tonight, though."

"Good!" says I. "I'll be looking for you out front after the first act."

And, say, when this party who's listed on the program as Jean Jolly comes boundin' in with Ronald Breen I'll admit she had me sittin' up with my ears tinted pink. No use goin' into details about her costume. It's hardly worth while—a little white satin here and there and a touch of black tulle.

"Well!" gasps Vee. "Is that your little Miss Joyce?"

"I can hardly believe it," says I.

"I should hope not," says Vee. "But she is cute, isn't she? And see that kick! Oh-h-h-h!"

I was still red in the face, I expect, when I trails out at the end of the act and discovers Lester leanin' against the lobby wall.

"Say, Torchy," says he husky, "did—did you see her?"

"Miss Joyce?" says I. "Sure. Some pip-

pin in the act, isn't she? Didn't she send you word she was goin' to be in this with Ronald Breen?"

"Me?" says he. "No."

"That's funny," says I. "She told me weeks ago. I hear she's pulling down an even hundred and fifty a week. By next season she'll be starrin'."

"And to think," moans out Lester, "that I passed her up only a few months ago!"

"Yes," says I, "considerin' your chronic ambition, that was once when you were out of luck. And the worst of it is that maybe she was only usin' you to practice on all along. Eh?"

Perhaps it wasn't a consolin' thought to leave with Lester, but somehow I couldn't help grin-nin' as I tossed it over. And me, I'm dopping out no more advice to young ladies from Saskatoon or elsewhere. I'm off that side-line permanent.

CHAPTER XVI

TORCHY TACKLES A MYSTERY

I'LL admit I didn't get all stirred up when Mr. Robert comes in from luncheon and announces that this Penrhyn Deems person is missing.

"On how many cylinders?" says I.

I might have added, too, that even if he'd been mislaid permanent I could struggle along. First off, anybody with a name like that could be easy spared. Penrhyn! Always reminded me of a headache tablet. Where did he get such a fancy tag? I never could believe that was sprinkled on him. Listened to me like something he'd thought up himself when he saw the chance of its being used so much on four sheets and bill-boards. And if you'd ask me I'd said that the prospect of his not contributin' any more of them musical things to the Broadway stage wasn't good cause for decreein' a lodge of sorrow. Them last two efforts of his certainly was punk enough to excuse him from tryin' again. What if he had done the lines and lyrics to "The Buccaneer's Bride"? That didn't give him any license to unload bush-league stuff for the rest of his career, did it?

Begun to look like his first big hit had been more or less of an accident. That being the case maybe it was time for him to fade out.

Course, I didn't favor Mr. Robert with all this. Him and Penrhyn Deems was old college chums together, and while they ain't been real thick in late years they have sort of kept in touch. I suspect that since Penrhyn got to ratin' himself as kind of a combination of Reggie DeKoven and George Cohan he ain't been so easy to get along with. Maybe I'm wrong, but from the few times I've seen him blowin' in here at the Corrugated that was my dope. You know. One of these parties who carries his chest out and walks heavy on his heels. Yes, I should judge that the ego in Penrhyn's make-up would run well over 2.75 per cent.

But it takes more'n that to get him scratched from Mr. Robert's list. He's strong for keepin' up old friendships, Mr. Robert is. He remembers whatever good points they have and lets it ride at that. So he's always right there with the friendly hail whenever Penrhyn swaggers in wearin' them noisy costumes that he has such a weakness for, and with his eyebrows touched up and his cutie-boy mustache effect decoratin' that thick upper lip. How a fat party like him could work up so much personal esteem I never could understand. But they do. You watch next time you're on a subway platform, who it is that gazes most fond into the gum-machine

mirrors and if it ain't mostly these blimp-built boys with a 40 belt measure then I'm wrong on my statistics. Anyway, Penrhyn is that kind.

"This is the third day that he has been missing, Torchy," says Mr. Robert, solemn.

"Yes?" says I. "Seems to me I saw an item about him in the theatrical notes yesterday, something about his being a. w. o. l. Kind of joshing, it read, like they didn't take it serious."

"That's the disgusting part of it," says Mr. Robert. "Here is a man who disappears suddenly, to whom almost anything may have happened, from being run over by a truck to robbery and murder; yet, because he happens to be connected with the theatrical business, it is referred to as if it were some kind of a joke. Why, he may be lying unidentified in some hospital, or at the bottom of the North River."

"Anybody out looking for him?" I asks.

"Not so far as I can discover," says Mr. Robert. "I have 'phoned up to the Shuman offices—they're putting on his new piece, you know—but I got no satisfaction at all. He hadn't been there for several days. That was all they knew. Yes, there had been talk of giving the case to a detective agency, but they weren't sure it had been done. And here is his poor mother up in New Rochelle, almost on the verge of nervous prostration. There is his fiancée, too; little Betty Parsons, who is crying her eyes out. Nice girl, Betty. And it's a shame that

something isn't being done. Anyway, I shall do what I can."

"Sure!" says I. "I hadn't thought about his having a mother—and a girl. But say, Mr. Robert, maybe I can put you next to somebody at Shuman's who can give you the dope. I got a friend up there—Whitey Weeks. Used to do reportin'. Last time I met him though, he admitted modest that Alf. Shuman had come beggin' him to take full charge of the publicity end of all his attractions. So if anybody has had any late bulletins about Mr. Deems it's bound to be Whitey."

"Suppose you ring him up, then," says Mr. Robert.

"When I'm trying to extract the truth from Whitey," says I, "I want to be where I can watch his eyes. He's all right in his way, but he's as shifty as a jumpin' bean. If you want the facts I'd better go myself. Maybe you'd better come, too, Mr. Robert."

He agrees to that and inside of half an hour we've pushed through a mob of would-be and has-been chorus females and have squeezed into the little coop where Whitey presides important behind a big double-breasted roll-top. And when I explains how Mr. Robert is an old friend of Penrhyn's, and is actin' for the heart-broken mother and the weepin' fiancée as well, Whitey shakes his head solemn.

"Sorry, gentlemen," says he, "but we haven't

heard a word from him since he disappeared. Haven't even a clue. It's an absolute mystery. He seems to have vanished, that's all. And we don't know what to make of it. Rather embarrassing for us, too. You know we've just started rehearsals for his new piece, 'Oh, Say, Belinda!' Biggest thing he's done yet. And Mr. Shuman has spent nearly \$10,000 for the setting and costumes of one number alone. Yet here Deems walks off with the lyrics for that song—the only copy in existence, mind you—and drops out of sight. I suppose he wanted to revise the verses. You see the hole it put us in, though. We're rushing 'Belinda' through for an early production, and he strays off with the words to what's bound to be the big song hit of the season. Why, Miss Ladue, who does that solo, is about crazy, and as for Mr. Shuman——”

“Yes, I understand, Whitey,” I breaks in. “That's good press agent stuff, all right. But Mr. Ellins here ain't so much worried over what's going to happen to the show as he is over what has happened to Penrhyn Deems. Now how did he disappear? Who saw him last?”

Whitey shrugs his shoulders. “All a mystery, I tell you,” says he. “We haven't a single clue.”

“And you're just sitting back wondering what has become of him,” demands Mr. Robert, “without making an effort to trace him?”

"Well, what can we do?" asks Whitey. "If the fool newspapers would only wake up to the fact that a prominent personage is missing, and give us the proper space, that might help. They will in time, of course. Got to come to it. But you know how it is. Anything from a press bureau they're apt to sniff over suspicious. As if I'd pull one as raw as this on 'em! Huh! But I'm working up the interest, and by next Sunday I'll bet they'll be carrying front page headlines, 'Where is Penrhyn Deems?' You'll see."

"Suppose he should turn up tomorrow, though?" I asks.

"Oh, but he couldn't," says Whitey quick. "That is, if he's really lost or—or anything has happened to him. What makes you think he might show up, Torchy?"

"Just a hunch of mine," says I. "I was thinking maybe some of his friends might find him somewhere."

"I'd like to see 'em," says Whitey emphatic. "It—it would be worth a good deal to us."

"Yes," says I, "I know how you feel about it. Much obliged, Whitey. I guess that's all we can do; eh, Mr. Robert?"

But we're no sooner out of the office than I gives him the nudge.

"Bunk!" says I. "I'd bet a million of somebody else's money that this is just one of Whitey's smooth frame-ups."

"I hardly think I follow you," says Mr. Robert.

"Here's the idea," says I. "When 'The Buccaneer's Bride' was having that two-year run Penrhyn Deems was a good deal in the spotlight. He had write-ups reg'lar, full pages in the Sunday editions, new pictures of himself printed every few weeks. He didn't hate it, did he? But these last two pieces of his were frosts. All he's had recent have been roasts, or no mention at all. And it was up to Whitey to bring him back into the public eye, wasn't it? Trust Whitey for doing that."

"But this method would be so thoroughly cold-blooded, heartless," protests Mr. Robert.

"Wouldn't stop Whitey, though," says I.

"Then we must do our best to find Penrhyn," says he.

"Sure!" says I. "Sleuth stuff. How about startin' at his rooms and interviewin' his man?"

"Good!" says Mr. Robert. "We will go there at once."

We did. But what we got out of that pie-faced Nimms of Penrhyn's wasn't worth taking notes of. He's got a map about as full of expression as the south side of a squash, Nimms. A peanut-headed Cockney that Penrhyn found somewhere in London.

"Sure I cawn't say, sir," says he, "where

the mawster went to, sir. It was lawst Monday night 'e vanished, sir."

"Whaddye mean, vanished?" says I.

"'E just walked out, sir, and never came back," says Nimms. "See, sir, I've 'ad 'is morning suit all laid out ever since, sir."

"Then he went in evening clothes?" puts in Mr. Robert.

"Not exactly, sir," says Nimms. "'E was attired as a court jester, sir; in motley, you know, sir, and cap and bells."

"Wha-a-at?" says Mr. Robert. "In a fool's costume? You say he went out in that rig? Why the deuce should he——"

"I didn't ask the mawster, sir," says Nimms, "but my private opinion of the matter, sir, is that he was on 'is way to a masked banquet of some sort. I 'appened to see a hinvitation, sir, that——"

"Dig it up, Nimms," says I. "Might be a clue."

Sure enough, Nimms had it stowed away; and the fat-head hadn't said a word about it before. It's an invite to the annual costume dinner of the Bright Lights Club.

"Huh!" says I. "I've heard of that bunch—mostly producers, stage stars and dramatists. Branch of the Lambs Club. Whitey would have known about that event, too. And Alf. Shuman. If Deems had been there they'd have known. So he didn't get there. I expect he

wore a rain coat or something over his costume, and went in a taxi; eh, Nimms?"

"Quite so, sir," says Nimms. "A long rain-coat, sir."

"But," breaks in Mr. Robert, "a man couldn't wander around New York dressed in a fool's costume without being noticed. That is, not for several days."

"You bet he couldn't," says I. "So he didn't."

That's a good line to pull, that "he couldn't, so he didn't," when you're doin' this Sherlock-Watson stuff. Sounds professional. Mr. Robert nods and then looks at me expectant as if he was waitin' to hear what I'd deduce next. But as a matter of fact my deducer was runnin' down. Yet when you've got a boss who always expects you to cerebrate in high gear, as he's so fond of puttin' it, you've got to produce something off-hand, or stall around.

"Now, let's see," says I, registerin' deep thought, "if Penrhyn was to go anywhere on his own hook, where would it be? You know his habits pretty well, Mr. Robert. What's your guess?"

"Why, I should say he would make for the nearest golf course," says he.

"He's a golf shark, is he?" says I.

"Not in the sense you mean," says Mr. Robert. "Hardly. Penrhyn is a consistent but earnest duffer. The ambition of his life is to

break 100 on some decent course. He has talked enough about it to me. Yes, that is probably where he is, if he's still alive, off playing golf somewhere."

"Begging your pardon, sir," puts in Nimms, "but that could 'ardly be so, sir, seeing as 'ow 'is sticks are still 'ere. That's the strange part of 'is disappearance, sir. 'E never travels without 'is bag of sticks. And they're in that closet, sir."

"Couldn't he rent an outfit, or borrow one?" I suggests.

"He could," says Mr. Robert, "but he wouldn't. No more than you would rent a toothbrush. That is one of the symptoms of the golf duffer. He has his pet clubs and imagines he can play with no others. I think we must agree with Nimms. If we do, the case looks serious again, for Penrhyn would certainly not go away voluntarily unless it was to some place where he could indulge in his mania."

"That's it!" says I. "Then he's been steered somewhere against his will. That's the line! Which brings us back to Whitey Weeks. Who else but Whitey would want him shunted off out of sight for a week or so?"

"But you don't think he would go so far as to kidnap Penrhyn, do you?" asks Mr. Robert.

"Who, Whitey?" says I. "He'd kidnap his grandmother if he saw a front page story in it. Maybe he'd had this disappearance stunt all

worked up when Mr. Deems balked. So he gets him when he's rigged up in some crazy costume, with all his regular clothes at home, and tolls him off to some out of the way spot. See? In that rig Penrhyn would have to stay put, wouldn't he? Couldn't show himself among folks without being mobbed. So he'd have to lay low until someone brought him a suit of clothes."

"That would be an ingenious way of doing it," admits Mr. Robert.

"Believe me, Whitey has that kind of a mind," says I, "or else he wouldn't be handling the Alf. Shuman publicity work."

"But where could he have taken him?" asks Mr. Robert.

"We're just gettin' to that," says I. Where would he? Now if this was a movie play we was dopin' out it would be simple. He'd be taken off on a yacht. But Whitey couldn't get the use of a yacht. He don't travel in that class, and Shuman wouldn't stand for the charter price in an expense bill. A lonesome farm would be a good spot. But Penrhyn could borrow a rube outfit and escape from a farm. A lighthouse would be a swell place to stow away a leading librettist dressed up in a fool's costume, wouldn't it? Or an island? Say, I'll bet I've got it!"

"Eh?" says Mr. Robert.

"He's on an island," says I. "High Bar

Island. It's a place where Whitey goes duck shootin' every fall. He belongs to a club that owns it. Anyway, he did. Used to feed me an earful about what a great gunner he was, and what thrillin' times he had at the old shack. Down somewhere in Barnegat Bay, back of the lighthouse. Yep! He's there, if he's anywhere."

"Sounds rather unlikely," says Mr. Robert. "Still, you seem to have an uncanny instinct for being right in such matters. Perhaps we ought to go down and see. Come."

"What, now?" says I. "Right away?"

"There is his mother, almost in hysterics," says Mr. Robert, "and his sweetheart. Think of the suspense, the mental strain they must be under. If we can find Penrhyn we must do so as quickly as possible. Let's go back to the office and look up train connections."

Well, if we'd started half an hour earlier we'd been all right. As it was we could hang up all night at some dinky junction or wait over until next morning. Neither suited Mr. Robert. He 'phones for his tourin' car and decides to motor down into Jersey. Also he has a kit bag packed for two of us and collects from Nimms a full outfit of daylight clothes for Penryln.

We got away about five o'clock and as Mr. Robert figures by the Blue Book that we have only a hundred and some odd miles to run he thinks we ought to make some place near Barne-

gat Light by nine o'clock. Maybe we would have, too, if we'd caught the Staten Island ferries right at both ends, and hadn't had two blow-outs and strayed off the road once. As it is we finally lands at little joint that shows on the map as Forked River about 1 a.m. There wasn't a light in the whole place and it took us half an hour to pry the landlord of the hotel out of the feathers. No, he couldn't tell us where we could get a boat to take us out to High Bar at that time of night. It wasn't being done. Folks didn't go there often anyway, and when they did they started after breakfast.

"It'll be there in the morning, you know," says he."

"That's so," says Mr. Robert. "Have a motor boat ready at nine o'clock. Not much use getting there before 10:30. Penrhyn wouldn't be up."

That sounded sensible to me. When I go huntin' for lost dramatists I like to take it easy and be braced up for the day with a good shot of ham and eggs. This part of the program was carried out smooth. And it's a nice little sail across old Barnegat Bay with the oyster fleet busy and the fishin' boats dotted around. But the native who piloted us out was doubtful about anybody's being on High Bar.

"I seen some parties shootin' around on Love Ladies yesterday," says he, "an' a couple more

was snipin' on Sea Dog, but I didn't hear nary gun let off on th' Bar."

"Oh, my friend doesn't shoot, anyway," says Mr. Robert.

"Ain't nothin' else for him to do on High Bar," says the native, "less'n he wants to collect skeeter bites."

When we got close enough to see the island I begun to suspicion I'd missed out on my hunch, for there ain't a soul in sight. We could see the whole of it, too, for the highest part isn't much over two feet above tide-water mark. Near the boat landing is the club house, set up on piling, with a veranda across the front. The rest of High Bar is only a few acres of sedge and marsh.

"Yea-uh!" says the native. "Must be somebody thar. Door's open. Yea-uh! Thar's old Lem Robbins, who allus does the cookin'. Hey, Lem!"

Lem waves cordial and waddles down to meet us. He's a fat, grizzled old pirate who looked bored and discontented.

"Got anybody with you, Lem?" asks the native.

"Not to speak of," says Lem. "Only a loony sort of gent that wears skin-tight barber-pole pants and cusses fluent."

"That's Penrhyn!" says Mr. Robert. "Dressed as a fool, isn't he?"

"You've said it," says Lem. "Acts like one,

too. Hope you gents have come to take him back where he belongs. Needs to be shut up, he does."

"But where is he?" demands Mr. Robert.

"Out back of the house, swingin' an old boat-hook and carryin' on simple," says Lem. "I'll show you."

It was some sight, too. For there is the famous author of "The Buccaneer's Bride," rigged out complete in a more or less soiled jester's costume, includin' the turkey red head-piece with the bells on it. He's standing on a heap of shells and waving this rusty boat-hook around. Course, I expects when he sees Mr. Robert and realizes how he's been rescued he'll come out of his spell and begin to act rational once more. But it don't work out that way. When Mr. Robert calls out to him and he sees who it is, he keeps right on swingin' the boat-hook.

"Glory be, Bob!" he sings out. "I've got it at last."

"Got what, Penny?" demands Mr. Robert.

"My drive," says he. "Watch, Bob. How's that, eh? Notice that carry through? Wouldn't that spank the pill 200 yards straight down the fairway? Wouldn't it, now?"

"Oh, I say, Penny!" says Mr. Robert. "Don't be more of an ass than you can help. Quit that golf tommyrot and tell me what you're doing here in this forsaken spot when all New

York is thinking that maybe you've been murdered or something."

"Eh?" says Penrhyn. "Then—then the news is out, is it? Did you bring any papers?"

"Papers?" says Mr. Robert. "No."

"Wish you had," says Penrhyn. "Got everyone stirred up, I suppose? Tell me, though, how are people taking it?"

"If you mean the public in general," says Mr. Robert, "I think they are bearing up nobly. But your mother and Betty——"

"By George!" breaks in Penrhyn. "That's so! They might be rather disturbed. I—I never thought about them."

"Didn't, eh?" says Mr. Robert. "No, you wouldn't. You were thinking about Penrhyn Deems, as usual. And I must say, Penny, you're the limit. I've a good notion to leave you here."

"No, no, Bob! Don't do that," pleads Penrhyn. "Disgusting place. And I dislike that cook person, very much. Besides, I must get back. Really."

"Want to relieve your poor old mother and Betty, eh?" asks Mr. Robert.

"Yes, of course," says Penrhyn. "Besides, I want to try this swing with my driver. Bob, I'm sure I can put in that wrist snap at last. And if I can I—I'll be playing in the 90's. Sure!"

He's a wonder, Penrhyn. He has this hoof

and mouth disease, otherwise known as golf, worse than anybody I ever met before. Took Mr. Robert another ten minutes to get him calmed down enough so he could tell how he come to be marooned on this island in that rig.

“Why, it was that new press agent of Shuman’s, of course,” says Penrhyn. “That Weeks person. He did it.”

“You don’t mean to say, Penny,” says Mr. Robert, “that you were kidnapped and brought here a prisoner?”

“Not at all,” says Penny. “We drove down here at night and came in a boat just at daylight. Silly performance. Especially wearing this costume. But he insisted that it would make the disappearance more plausible, more dramatic. Wouldn’t tell me where we were going, either. Said it was a club house, so I thought of course there would be golf. But look at this hole! And I’ve had four days of it. Mosquitoes? Something frightful. That’s why I’ve kept on the cap and bells. At first I put in the time working over one of the songs in the new piece. Wrote some ripping verses, too. They’ll go strong. Best thing I’ve done. But after I had finished that job I wanted to play golf; practice, anyway. And I was nearly crazy until I found this old boat-hook and began knocking oyster shells into the water. That’s how it came to me—the drive. If I can only hold it!”

I suggests how Mr. Weeks is probably plan-nin' for him to stay lost until over Sunday anyway, so he can work some big space in the newspapers.

"Oh, bother Mr. Weeks!" says Penrhyn. "I've had enough of this. The new piece is going to go big, anyway. Come along, Bob. Let's start. I'll 'phone to mother and Betty, and maybe I can get in eighteen holes this afternoon. Brought some clothes for me, didn't you? I must change from this rig first."

"I wouldn't," says Mr. Robert. "It's quite appropriate, Penny."

But Penrhyn wouldn't be joshed and makes a dive for his suitcase. We lands him back on Broadway at 4:30 that same afternoon. My first move after gettin' to the Corrugated general offices is to ring up Whitey Weeks.

"This is Torchy," says I. "And ain't it awful about Penrhyn Deems?"

"Eh?" gasps Whitey. "What about him?"

"He's been found," says I. "Uh-huh! Discovered on an island by some fool friends that brought him back to town. I just saw him on Broadway."

"The simp!" groans Whitey.

"You're a great little describer, Whitey," says I. "Simp is right. But next time you want to win front page space by losing a dramatist I'd advise you to lock him in a vault. Islands are too easy located."

CHAPTER XVII

WITH VINCENT AT THE TURN

It was Mr. Piddie who first begun workin' up suspicions about Vincent, our fair haired super-office boy. But then, Piddie has that kind of a mind. He must have been born on the dark of the moon when the wind was east in the year of the big eclipse. Something like that. Anyway, he's long on gloom and short on faith in human nature, and he goes gum-shoein' through life lookin' as slit-eyed as a tourist tom-cat four blocks from his own backyard.

Course, he has his good points, lots of 'em, or else he never would have held his job as office manager in the Corrugated Trust so long. And there's at least two human beings he thinks was made perfect from the start—Old Hickory Ellins and Mr. Robert. The rest of us he ain't sure of. We'll bear watchin'. And Piddie's idea of earnin' his salary is to be right there with the restless eye from 8:43 until 5:02, when he grabs his trusty commutation ticket and starts for the wilds of Jersey, leavin' the force to a whole night of idleness and wicked ways.

Still, I am a little surprised when he picks out Vincent.

"I regret to say it, Torchy," says he, "but someone ought to have an eye on that boy."

"Oh, come, Piddie!" says I. "Not Vincent! Why, he's a model youth. You've always said so yourself—polite, respectful, washes behind the ears, takes home his pay envelope uncracked to mother, all that sort of thing. Why the mournful headshake over him now?"

"I can't say what it is," says Piddie, "but there has been a change. Recently. Twice this week he has overstayed his luncheon hour. Yesterday he asked for his Liberty bond and war saving stamps from the safe. I believe he is planning to do something desperate."

"Huh!" says I. "Most likely he's plotting to pay off the mortgage on the little bungalow as a birthday present for mother."

Piddie won't have it that way, though. "I think there's a woman in the case," says he, "and I'm sure it isn't his mother."

"A woman; Vincent?" says I. "Ah, quit your kiddin', Piddie. I'd as soon think it of you."

That brings the pink to his ears and he stiffens indignant. But in a minute or so he gets over it enough to explain that he's noticed Vincent fussin' with his necktie and slickin' his hair back careful before quittin' time. Also that Vincent has taken to gettin' shaved once a week reg'lar now, instead of every month.

"And he seemed very nervous when he took

away his savings," adds Piddie. "Of course, in my position I could ask for no confidences of a personal nature; but if someone else could have a talk with him.—Well, you, for example, Torchy."

"What a cute little idea!" says I. "What would be the openin' lines for that scene? Something like, 'Come, my erring lad, rest your fair, sin-soaked head on my knee and tell your Uncle Torchy how you are secretly scheming to kidnap the rich gum profiteer's lovely daughter and carry her off to Muckhurst-on-the-Marsh.' Piddie, you're a wonder."

I was still chucklin' over the notion as I breezed out to lunch, but as I pushes out of the express elevator and starts across the arcade toward the Broadway exit I lamps something over by the candy booth that leaves me with my mouth open. There is Vincent hung up against the counter gazin' mushy into the dark dangerous orbs of Mirabelle, the box-trade queen.

Course, we all know Mirabelle in the Corrugated buildin', for she's been presidin' over the candy counter almost as long as the arcade shops have been open. She's what you might call an institution; like Apollo Mike, the elevator starter; or old Walrus Smith, the night watchman. And I expect there ain't a young hick or a middle-aged bookkeeper on all them twenty-odd floors but what has had his little thrill from gettin' in line, some time or another,

with a cut-up look from them high voltage eyes. She's just one of the many perils, Mirabelle is, that line the path of the poor working man in the great city. That is, she looks the part.

As a matter of fact, I've always had Mirabelle sized up as a near-vamp who had worked up the act to boost sales and cinch her job. Anyway, I never knew of her lurin' her victims into anything more desperate than a red-ink table d'hôte dinner or a six-dollar orgie at a cabaret. And somehow they all seem to wriggle out of the net within a week or so with no worse casualties than a feverish yearnin' for next pay day and a wise look in the eyes. I've watched some of them young sports from the bond room have their little fling with Mirabelle and not one of 'em has come out a human wreck.

Maybe they discover that Mirabelle has turned thirty. I'll admit she don't look it, 'specially under the pink-shaded counter light when she's had a henna treatment lately and been careful to spread the make-up artistic. The jet ear dangles helps some, too. Then there are them misbehavin' eyes. Also when it comes to light and frivolous chat Mirabelle is right there with the zippy patter. Oh my, yes! Try shootin' anything fresh across when she's wrappin' a pound of mixed chocolates and you'll get a quick one back from Mirabelle. Probably a quizzin', twisty smile, too that sends you off kiddin' yourself that you're quite a gay bird

when you really cut loose, and where's the harm once in a while? You know the kind.

But to think that Vincent should be fallin' for Mirabelle. Why, he sits there all day behind the gate in plain sight of a battery of twenty lady typists, some of 'em as kittenish young things as ever blew a week's salary into a permanent wave and I've never even seen him so much as roll an eye at one. Besides, he's as perfect a specimen of a Mommer's boy as you could find between here and the Battery. Not that he's a male ingénue. He's just a nice boy, Vincent, always neat and polite and ready to admit that he has the best little mother in the world. I don't blame him for thinkin' so either, for I've seen her a couple of times and if I'm any judge she fits the description. She's a widow, you know, and she and Vincent are strugglin' along on the life insurance until they make Vincent general manager or vice-president or something.

So, as I was telling you, it gives me more or less of a jolt to see Vincent flutterin' around Mirabelle. There's no mistakin' the motions, either. He's draped himself careless over the end of the counter and them big innocent blue eyes of his are fairly glued on Mirabelle, while a simple smile comes and goes, dependin' on whether she's lookin' his way or not. Just as I stops to gawp at the proceedin's he seems to be askin' her something, real eager and earnest.

For a second Mirabelle arches her plucked eyebrows and puckers her lips coy as if she was lettin' on to be shocked. Then she glances around cautious to see if the coast is clear, reaches out and pats Vincent tender on the cheek and whispers something in his ear.

A minute later Mirabelle is smilin' mechanical at a fat man who's stopped to buy a box of chocolate peppermints and Vincent is swingin' past me with his chin up and his eyes bright. It don't take any seventh son work to guess that Vincent has made a date. If it had been anybody else that wouldn't have meant nothing at all to me, but as it is I can't help feelin' that this was my cue. Just how or why I don't stop to figure out, but I falls in behind and trails along.

Vincent should have been headin' for the dairy lunch, but he starts in the other direction and after followin' him for five blocks I sees him dive into a jewelry store. Maybe that don't get a gasp out of me, too. Looks like our little Vincent was some speedy performer, don't it? And sure enough, by rubberin' in through the door, I can see a clerk haulin' out a tray of rings. Think of that! Vincent.

He must have been in there before and looked over the stock, for inside of ten minutes out he comes again. And by makin' a quick maneuver I manages to bump into him as he's leavin' the front door with the little white box in his fist.

"Well, well!" says I. "What's all this mean, old son? Been buyin' out the spark shop? I expect somebody's going to get a weddin' present, eh?"

"Not—not exactly," says Vincent, his cheeks pinkin' up and his right hand slidin' toward his coat pocket.

"Oh, ho!" says I, grabbin' the wrist and exposin' the little square package. "A ring or I'm a poor guesser. And it's for the sweetest girl in the world, ain't it?"

"It is," says Vincent, just a bit defiant.

"Congratulations, old man," says I, poundin' him friendly on the shoulder. "I don't suppose I could guess who, could I?"

"I—I don't think you could," says Vincent.

"Then it's my blow to luncheon—reg'lar chop-house feed in honor of the big event," says I, "Come along, Vincent, while I order a bottle of one and a half per cent. to drink to your luck."

Course, he can't very well get away from that, me being one of his bosses, as you might say. But he acts a little uneasy.

"You see, sir," says he, "it—it isn't quite settled."

"I get you," says I. "Going to spring it on her tonight, eh?"

He admits that is the plan.

"Durin' the course of a little dinner, eh?" I goes on.

Vincent nods.

"That's taking the high dive, all right," says I. "Lets you in deep, you know, when you go shovin' solitaires at 'em. But I expect you've thought it over careful and picked out the right girl."

"She is perfectly splendid," says Vincent.

"Well, that helps some," says I. "One that Mother approves of, I'll bet."

"Why," says Vincent, his chin droppin', "I am sure she will like her when—when she sees her."

"Let's see, Vincent," says I, "you're all of nineteen, ain't you?"

"Nearly twenty," says he.

"How we do come along!" says I. "Why, when you took my old place on the gate you was still wearin' knickers, wasn't you? And now—I suppose it'll be a case of your bringin' home a new daughter to help Mother, eh?"

"Ye-e-es," says Vincent draggy.

"Lucky she's the right kind, then," I suggests.

"She's a wonderful girl, Torchy. Wonderful," says he.

"Well, I expect you're a judge," says I.

"I've never known anyone just like her," he goes on, "and if she'll have me——" He wags his head determined.

I was hardly lookin' for such a stubborn streak in Vincent. He's always seemed so

mild and modest. But you never can tell. There's no doubt about his having his mind all made up about Mirabelle, and while her name ain't mentioned once he consents to tell me what a perfectly sweet and lovely person she is. If I hadn't had a hunch who he ~~was~~ talking about I'm afraid I never would have guessed from the description. She'd put the spell on him for fair. That being the way things stood what was the use of my coming in with an argument? The most I could do was to hint that Vincent's salary as head office boy might be a bit strained when it came to providin' for two.

He has the answer to that, though. He's got the promise of a filing clerk's job the first of the year, with a raise every six months if he makes good.

"Besides," he adds, "I may pick up a little something extra very soon."

"Eh?" says I. "You ain't been plungin' on a curb tip, have you?"

He nods. "It came to me very straight, sir," says he. "Oil stocks."

"Good-night!" I groans. "Say, Vincent, you're off in high gear, all right. Matrimony and gushers, all at one clip! Lemme get my breath. Have you put up for the margins?"

"Oh, yes," says Vincent.

"Then have another piece of pie and a second cup of coffee," says I. "You're going to need bracin' up."

Not that I proceeds to deal out the wise stuff about oil stocks along the Talk to Investors line. It's too late for that. Besides, Vincent was due to get a lesson in the folly of piker speculatin' that would last him a long time. Maybe it was best for him to get it early in his young career.

But it was going to be rough on the little mother when she hears how her darling boy has sneaked out the nest egg and tossed it reckless into the middle of Broad Street. That would be some bump. And then on top of that if Mirabelle is introduced as her future daughter-in-law—Well, you can frame up the picture for yourself. And right there I organizes myself into a relief expedition to rescue the Lost Battalion.

I got to admit that my plan of campaign was a trifle vague. About as far as I could get was decidin' that somebody ought to have speech with Mirabelle on the subject. And when we hurries back through the arcade again, ten minutes behind schedule, and I catches the little exchange of fond looks between the two, I knows that whatever is done needs to be started right away. So I mumbles something about having forgotten an errand, makes a round trip in the elevator, and am back at the candy counter almost as soon as Vincent has hung up his hat.

"Yes-s-s, sir?" says Mirabelle inquiren', with

her best dollar-fifty-quality smile playin' around where the lip-stick has given nature a boost.

"Hard gum drops," says I, "or chocolate marshmallows, or most anything in half-pound size. The main idea is a little chat with you."

"Naughty, naughty!" says Mirabelle, shaking her head until the jet ear dangles are doing a one-step. "But you men are all alike, aren't you?"

"Is that why you've taken to cradle snatch-in'?" says I.

Mirabelle executes the wide shutter movement with her eyes and finishes with what she thinks is a Mary Pickford pout. "Really, I don't think I get you," says she. "In other words, meaning what?"

"Referring to the boy, Vincent," says I.

"Oh!" says she, eying me curious. "Dear little fellow, isn't he?"

"Of course," I goes on, "if it's only a case of adoption——"

"Say," she breaks in, her eyelids gettin' narrow, "some of you cerise blondes ought to be confined to the comic strips. Who do you think you're kidding, anyway?"

"Sorry, Mirabelle," says I, "but you're all wrong. This is straight heart-to-heart stuff. You know you've been stringin' Vincent along."

"Suppose I have?" demands Mirabelle. "Where do you get a license to crash in?"

"Just what I was working up to," says I. "For one thing, he's the only perfect office boy in captivity. The Corrugated can't spare him. Then again, there's Mother. Honest, Mirabelle, you ought to see Mother—reg'lar stage widow, with the sad sweet smile, the soft gray hair, 'n'everything. If you could, you'd lay off this Theda Bara act the next minute."

It was a poor hunch, pullin' out that sympathy stop for Mirabelle. I knew that when I saw them black eyes of hers begin to give off sparks.

"Listen, son," says she, "if you feel as bad as all that run down in the sub-cellar and sob in the coal bins. I'll be getting nervous, next thing I know, listening to ravings like that."

"My error," says I. "Course, you didn't know how a few kind words and a little off-hand target practice with the eyes would affect Vincent. How should you? But he's taking it all serious. Uh-huh! Been buying the ring."

"What!" says Mirabelle, startled.

"A real blue-white, set in platinum," says I. "On the instalments, of course. And he's plugin' with all his war savings on wild cat stocks to make good. Oh, he's in a reg'lar trance, Vincent. So you see?"

Mirabelle seems to see a good deal more than I was expectin' her to. Just now she's glancin' approvin' into one of the display mirrors and is pattin' down the hair puffs over her ears.

"He *is* a dear boy," she remarks, more to the mirror than to me.

"But look here," says I, "you—you wouldn't let him go on with this, would you?"

"I beg pardon?" says Mirabelle. "Still chattering, are you? Well, stretch your ear once, young feller. When I want your help in this I'll send out a call. If you don't get one you'll know you ain't needed. Here's your package, sir. Sixty cents, please."

And I'm given the quick shunt, just like that. Whatever it was I thought I was doing, I'd bugged it. The rescue expedition had gone on the rocks. Absolutely. I might have known better, too; spillin' all that dope about the solitaire. As if that would throw a scare into Mirabelle! Of all the bush-league plays! Instead of untanglin' Vincent any from the net I'd only got him twisted up tighter. With that ring on him he was just as safe as an exposed pocket flask at an Elks' picnic.

I was retreatin' draggy with my chin down when I happens to get a grin from this wise guy Marcus, in charge of the cigar booth opposite.

"You don't have no luck with Mirabelle, eh?" says he winkin'. "That's too bad, ain't it? But there's lots of others. She keeps 'em all guessin'. Hard in the heart, Mirabelle has been, ever since she got thrown overboard herself."

“Eh?” says I. “When was that? Who did it?”

“Oh, near a year now,” says Marcus. “You know the feller who was in with me here—Chuck Dempsey?”

“The big husk with the bushy black eye-brows?” says I.

Marcus nods. “He had Mirabelle goin’ all right,” says he. “She was crazy over him. And Chuck, he was pretty strong for her, too. They had it all fixed up, the flat picked out and all, when something or other bust it up. I dunno what. Chuck, he quits the next day. Lucky thing, too, for if he’d stuck here he wouldn’t have met up with them automobile sundries people and landed his new job. I hear he’s manager of their Harlem branch now, seventy-five a week. Wouldn’t Mirabelle be sore if she knew about that, eh?”

“She’d have cause for grindin’ her teeth,” says I. “Bully for Chuck, though. I must call him up and give him the hail. What’s his number?”

I will admit too, that once I got started, I worked fast. It took me less’n three minutes to pump out of Vincent the time and place of this fatal little dinner party he was about to pull off, and shortly after that I had Mr. Dempsey on the wire. Yes, he says he remembers me well enough, on account of my hair. Most of ’em do.

"It's a shame you've forgot someone else so quick, though," I adds.

"Who's that?" says he.

"Mirabelle," says I.

"Oh, I don't know," says Chuck. "Maybe it's just as well."

"She don't think so," says I.

"Who was feedin' you that?" asks Dempsey.

"A certain party," says I. "But you know how easy a queen like her can pick up an understudy. Some have been mighty busy lately, too; one in particular. And I don't mind sayin' I'd hate to see him win out."

"Yes, she's some girl, all right," says Chuck, "even if I did get a little sore on her one night. I might be droppin' around again some of these days."

"If I was you," says I, "I'd make it snappy. In fact, not later than 6:30 this evening. That is, unless you're content to figure as an also ran."

He's an enterprisin' young gent, Mr. Dempsey. And it seems he ain't closed the book on Mirabelle for good. He's rather interested in hearin' where she'll be waitin' at that hour and makes a note of it.

"Much obliged for the tip, Torchy," says he. "I'll think it over."

I hoped he would. It was the best I could do for Vincent, except hang around and 'phone out to Vee that probably I'd be late home for

dinner. Seeing as how I was drillin' around at 6:30 in a doorway up opposite the Café Caroni it looked like I would. But I'd seen Chuck Dempsey drift in all dolled up sporty, and then Mirabelle. As for Vincent, he was right on the dot, as usual. He wasn't tickled to death to find me waitin' for him, either.

"Oh, I say, Torchy!" he protests.

"You wouldn't want to make it a threesome, eh?" I suggests.

"I'd much rather not," says he.

"Then we'll remember that," says I. "No harm in my edgin' in long enough to drop a word to Joe, the head waiter, to give you a nice quiet corner table and take care of you well, is there?"

"I'm sorry," says Vincent. "I didn't know but what you——"

"Not me," says I. "I'll stay long enough to get you started right. Come along. Ah, there's Joe, down at the end, and when he—Eh? Did you choke or anything? Well, of all things!"

Course, he'd spotted 'em right away—Mirabelle and Chuck Dempsey. They're at a little table over by the wall chattin' away cosy and confidential. It hadn't taken 'em long to re-establish friendly relations. In fact, Chuck was just reachin' playful for one of Mirabelle's hands and he was gettin' away with the act.

"Why," says I, "it looks like the S.R.O. sign was out already."

Yes, it was a bit raw for Vincent. He shows his polite bringin' up though. No rash moves or hasty words from him. He backs out graceful, even if he is a bit pale about the gills. And not until we're well outside does he let loose a husky remark.

"Well, I—I've been made a fool of, I suppose," says he.

"That depends on who's doing the judgin'," says I. "This Dempsey's no newcomer, you know. Anyway, now you can go home to dinner with Mother."

"But I can't," says Vincent. "You see, I left word that I was dining in town and she—she would want to know why I didn't."

"That's easy fixed," says I. "You're havin' dinner with me, out at my Long Island shack. Haven't seen the large-sized family I'm startin', have you? Well, here's your chance. And we can just make the 6:47."

Not that I'd planned it all out, but it was the best antidote to Mirabelle that I could have thought up. For Vee is—Well, she's quite different from Mirabelle. And I suspect after Vincent had watched her playin' her star part as the fond little wife, and been led up to the nursery to have the baby exhibited to him, and heard us joshin' each other friendly—Well

maybe he wondered how Mirabelle would show up in a strictly domestic sketch.

“Torchy,” says he, grippin’ my hand as I’m about to load him on the 10:26, “I believe I’m not going to care so much about losing Mirabelle, after all.”

“That’s bucking up,” says I. “And likely they’ll let you draw back your deposit on the ring. But you might as well bid them oil stock margins good-by.”

Oh, yes, I’m a bear at friendly advice. At least, I was until Vincent comes breezin’ in from lunch yesterday wearin’ a broad grin. He’d connected with a bull flurry and unloaded ten points to the good.

“Now for a king killing, eh?” says I.

“No,” says Vincent. “I’m through with— with everything.”

“Includin’ near-vamps?” says I.

He nods enthusiastic.

“Then I don’t see what’s goin’ to stop you from gettin’ a Solomon Wise ratin’ before they include you in the votin’ list,” says I. “Go to it, son.”

THE END

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